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"I positively will not wear them!" she said decisively.

MID THE THICK ARROWS

BY

MAX PEMBERTON

AUTHOR OF "BEATRICE OF VENICE," "DR. XAVIER," "KRONSTADT," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRED. PEGRAM, R.B.A.

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PROLOGUE

LA BELLE ESMERALDA

PERCIVAL EARL OF ALCESTER, having attained the ripe age of eighteen years, thought very little of a circus as an entertainment for men; and he did not hesitate to tell his tutor as much when they had taken their seats in a private box and settled themselves comfortably to wait for La belle Esmeralda.

"Just what I said," he grumbled, as he put away his hat beneath the velvet fauteuil, and surveyed the mighty audience with lofty disdain—"the old beastly rot. One ass who puts down a carpet and another who rolls it up. You can see that in London, Philip; there's no need to come to Paris to make a cab-horse go round and round. We should have had some fun at the Moulin Rouge. Just as if I haven't seen enough of the world to take care of myself. Oh, you bet, I know a thing or two!"

Philip, a weary tutor, paid five hundred pounds a year to keep the omniscient youth out of mischief, hastened to apologise for his shortcomings. It was true, he admitted, that a great deal of moral instruction might be had at the Moulin Rouge, and, of course, a circus was a children's entertainment. On the other hand, all Paris stooped just now to this childish folly for the sake of a woman whom artists had declared to

be the most beautiful in the world. It would be a thousand pities to leave Paris and not to have seen La belle Esmeralda, who balanced herself at dizzy heights, and obligingly dropped her superfluous drapery upon the heads of elderly gentlemen in the stalls.

"We'll do the Moulin Rouge next time we come, my boy. This girl is a wonder. You can take a photograph of her back to Cambridge."

"I don't want a photograph of her back," retorted Percy in the best spirit of his humour; "why, you do talk rot, Philip. We should have had some fun at the dancing place. This is as dry as 'Paley's Evidences'; and not a waiter within a mile."

"But, my dear fellow, you have just had dinner——"

"So have most people, haven't they? No meals between drinks, eh? You'll have to start a league, Philip. I'll be your first president."

"My dear Percy, the president of that league would soon require nothing more than a few feet of elm. Seriously, you drink too much. If you mean to do anything in the boats at Cambridge, I should advise you to think about that."

"I am thinking about it now. Just collect that waiter and order me a whiskey and soda."

"Why don't you order it yourself? You'll never learn to speak French if you don't practise it."

"I am practising it. I asked for a drink after lunch this morning and they brought me a pineapple. There's a joke for your book—but don't give me away."

Philip sighed a little wearily. This lisping youth bored him dreadfully. He reflected that he himself was already thirty years of age, and that all his wisdom and learning (and he had been a scholar of

Trinity) had earned him no better reward than the custody of maturing imbecility and a dullard's patronage. The mood did not go unobserved by the Earl of eighteen summers.

"You'd have made a splendid parson, Philip," he rambled on presently. "I can see you giving the old women sherry and bitters. And wouldn't you have made their wills for them! Why don't you take it up, old chap? You'll soon have finished with me. There's your chance. I'll give you the first living I have to chuck about, and when I'm dull you shall tell me about La belle Esmeralda. Oh, hang—if I could only get a waiter."

He leaned back wearily in his chair and chewed the end of his unlighted cigarette. A little to his surprise Philip Rose took him seriously, and answered his banter with a philosopher's gravity.

"No," he said, "the Church is the last place for shams, Percy. A parson should not only live well, he should think well. Perhaps I know too much of the world. Your merely good man is generally very simple. He looks down his street and says, 'Here is life.' I don't. I believe in human nature and an infinity of types——"

"Is La belle Esmeralda one of them?"

"Certainly—the type of the merely ornate. She is beautiful. It is the first duty of women to be that. She is also vain—pardonable in her sex. She likes to show herself where all the world can see her. Most women do that. She has a fine figure, and does not leave us to speculation. Smart society imitates her—but it only goes half way. She has the American dash——"

"I wish I had, Philip—just a soda with it."

Philip ignored him, and persisted—

"She has American dash, Spanish arrogance, French *verve*, and English hypocrisy—all virtues in their way. Her history is ambiguous—they say she is married. I hope not, for her husband's sake."

"Why drag in the husband? Don't be unpleasant, Philip."

"My dear fellow, the husband in the shadows is always the man I pity when I see a city going mad over a pretty face. Possibly he has toiled and slaved for this woman, adored her, lived for her. The success he has striven for robs him of all. The woman looks upon him as one who holds her back. She battles for freedom like a caged bird who hears other birds singing in the trees. Then comes tragedy. The two drift apart. The woman craves for freedom. The newspapers enjoy the privilege of headlines. We tell the story over a supper-table at the Savoy—but the man in the shadows, who pities him, poor devil?"

To Master Percival the problem thus propounded was too deep for solution. Certainly he did not pity gentlemen in this embarrassing position; and, for the rest, he met it with that convenient exclamation suited to so many occasions—"Oh, hang!" In the arena below them a very stout lady hopped laboriously upon the back of an equally stout white horse, while a red-nosed clown ran to and fro upon an imbecile's errand. It was a January night, cold and fresh; but the air within the great building was heavy with the acrid fumes of bad tobacco. Fathers of French families kept a watchful eye upon troops of merry children, as who should say, "I am doing my duty, but I can sup afterwards." These, however, were a respectable minority. The major portion of the audience seemed truly cosmo-

politan. Englishmen aping fine tastes in femininity jostled pushing Americans who heard that La belle Esmeralda hailed from California. Coarse Germans stood cheek by jowl with Poles and Russians and Spaniards, and gazed upward at the deserted trapeze, soon to carry this form divine at whose feet Paris worshipped. A blue haze of electric vapour floated about the electric lights. Waiters shouted "Ici!" incessantly, and went scurrying to and fro with the white banners of their calling beneath their arms. As for the women, every arondissement had contributed its quota. Duchesses and drabs were divided but by crazy boards. Belleville no less than the Faubourg St. Germain desired to criticise and to belittle La belle Esmeralda. Pretty girls came there to sneer at her; plain women to tell themselves that they resembled her in some particular feature. The babble of talk was incessant; no one cared anything at all for the fat lady who poised upon the contemptible horse. One item of the programme had filled the house. People waited for it in luxurious patience.

La belle Esmeralda appeared at ten o'clock. She was heralded by waddling clowns and gentlemen ushers in stockings that should have been white, and were undoubtedly of silk. The band played a Sousa march, in which the trombone gained an easy diploma. Master Percival, the Earl, had his whiskey and soda by this time, and had smoked his third cigarette. Philip Rose, dark-faced and grave, pulled at his heavy moustache and reflected a little ironically upon his salary as compared with that of this woman about to permit Paris to gaze upon her. He had lived a laborious, honest life; she, possibly, had never done an honest day's work since she came to years of indiscretion. And for every

pound that he earned, she was paid ten. A crazy world, he said, about which it did not do to think—so he lighted a cigar and listened to the raw youth's chatter.

"What does she do, Philip—is she a gymnast, and that kind of rot?"

"She sits upon that bar up there and looks beautiful."

The Earl strained his crane-like neck—he was a "record," he used to say, in the matter of collars—and observed a trapeze bar suspended from the very ceiling.

"Jolly long drop!" he reflected sagely. "Suppose she comes down all at once?"

"She will bounce like a beautiful ball in the net which those gentlemen are erecting."

"By Jove, what a catch!" was the Earl's subsiding comment.

A hush had fallen upon the assembly by this time. The band, the feelings of the gentleman with the trombone being relieved, played a slow waltz, languorous, and suggesting the subtleties of amours. Corks popped rarely, and hands were put upon bottles' mouths as though to shame them. Presently the hush deepened, the lights of the circus were turned down, the men of the ancient silk stockings ran back to their hutches. All was prepared for the great moment which a fanfare of trumpets and a very salvo of applause heralded. And so, in a flash, from darkness to blind light, from silence to a thunder of voices, the spectacle was revealed, and there, in a blaze of dazzling radiance, was La belle Esmeralda, standing at her ease upon the swinging bar. Even Philip Earl of Alcester offered her homage—"She's a stunner!" he said.

By no means a tall woman, essentially feminine, this Spaniard out of California justified in a large measure

the artists' praise of her. Raven hair fell about her shoulders almost to her feet. Her skin was deliciously white and clear, the eyes rounded and voluptuously black, the lips a little thick, but not to the point of coarseness. But it was the whole shape of the face, its piquancy and contrast, which won for her the reputation she had so easily achieved. For the face spoke of ripe womanhood, of love and desire and joy and light, and of evil not at all, save it were the evil of its beauty. Dressed in a long cloak glittering with stars, she showed at first but her shapely white arms to the people; but, by and by, as the applause subsided, she cast the cloak aside, and it fell over and over into the net stretched below her. Then was La belle Esmeralda superb in all her pride of conquest. A costume which was a very part of herself displayed the perfect symmetry of body and of limb—the true proportions, the unmatched shape of a matchless woman. Every movement was a graceful one; she could not raise a hand but the action was a pleasure to behold. Her lazy, deliberate gestures spoke of vanity awake and harvesting. She surveyed the crowd with amused disdain, as one who would say, "I know that you cannot resist me." Each day brought to her home the message and expectant offerings of this bold array of "followers." She knew their worth, weighed them in the balance of a clever mind, and watched the flowers perish as the hopes of their senders. They said that she would commit the indescribable folly of a marriage. That was the last thing she meant to do—for, in plain truth, La belle Esmeralda lived neither because to-morrow must be, nor yesterday was. The moment was her all. The instants of these triumphs she found all-satisfying.

"What a girl!" said Percival Earl of Alcester, whose

long neck ached with looking up, but whose eyes sparkled with wonder. "Do you think she really is married, Philip?"

"Are you very much interested in the question?" asked his tutor drily.

"Well, any fellow would be. Fancy letting your wife dangle from a bar like that!"

"My dear Philip, ladies of this profession do not usually consult their husbands' feelings."

"But she looks a decent sort—I wonder if she'd come to supper?"

"Ah, now you talk like an ass! I suppose you're in a hurry to have your ears boxed!"

"Well, I shouldn't mind if she came."

"Will you ask her husband as well?"

Percival giggled like a silly girl.

"The man in the shadows, eh? Oh, he's better where he is! What's she going to do now, Philip?"

"To come down by that swinging rope, apparently. We are to have a nearer view—I shouldn't wonder if she would honour us by shaking our hands."

"How ripping! Just look at her muscles! Why my arm's like a walking-stick compared with hers. Wouldn't she be grand in a fight?"

This immense idea greatly tickled him, whom a penny society paper had recently described as the "scion of a noble house." He sat back open-mouthed and gazed enraptured at the superb figure of the woman upon the bar. All about the crowd waited for La belle Esmeralda to drop. Fantastic beams of light, now crimson, now golden, now a ghastly green, played upon the uplifted arms and the hard-set face between them. Poising a moment to throw her kisses to enraptured males, the Spaniard stretched out a hand to the rope

beside the trapeze, and made a signal to the men at the trap-door above. Once again she looked above and below, then she cast herself from the bar into space. A fearful cry, a dreadful shudder, attended this performance, usually so full of grace and daring. Men averted their eyes while that bundle of white flesh and glittering stars fell like a meteor to the floor below. Women shrieked, children asked what it meant. None told them that the rope had broken, and that La belle Esmeralda was dead.

She fell without a sound or cry, her arms outstretched, her head thrown back. From every side, from every door of the great arena, the willing attendants rushed headlong to her side—clowns elbowing lacqueys, jugglers upon the heels of gymnasts. Doctors from the auditorium pushed their way through the throng and offered their services. The audience poured from the building in an affrighted stream. The figure of pleasure had been suddenly unmasked, and it wore the face of death.

"Good God, what a dreadful thing!" said the Earl as he stepped into his fiacre. Philip Rose did not reply. If one had pressed him he would have admitted that he was thinking of the husband in the shadows.

BOOK I

MAN AND WIFE

CHAPTER I

DEARLY BELOVED

LADY DICKY, standing upon the seat of her pew at the back of the church, commanded, as she said, a magnificent view of the spectacle, and she shared her advantages, verbally, with the Lady Anne, who was much too stout to stand; and, as she remarked aloud, could not possibly be expected to see through a man's back even if she could see through the man. The day was the fifth of June, the year 1900. Smart society, though satisfied with weddings, had yet an appetite for this particular wedding in the Church of St. Paul, at Knightsbridge. For had not the skittish, the ever-youthful Mary Countess of Alcester contrived a great match for her daughter Alice, and was not this the day of her hymeneal triumph? True, the more exacting critics declared it, in some sense, a defeat that the younger of the sisters, Alice, was taken while the elder, Ellen, was left. But the serpent-tongued Lady Anne was no party to this. "Ellen is a little shop-soiled," she remarked, kindly enough. "A rich man doesn't want remnants."

It was only her ladyship's fashion of speaking, said her friends. They adored the fashion when others were the models.

The crowd was great within St. Paul's monstrously ugly fane, and Lady Dicky, imitating her elegant, if slightly loud friend, Lady Bill (as they called her in the hunting field), made no bones whatever about standing on the seat.

"Excelsior!" she said, as she climbed upon the cushions and balanced herself adroitly by the aid of a stranger's shoulder, and then—"I wonder if Quentin Caird makes it hearts to-day?"

"He'll find his partner with a poor hand," said the old lady affably; and going on impatiently, she asked, "Do tell me, child, is her Highness here yet?"

"I don't see her, Lady Anne; there's Bobby Fenton, though, and he's had his hair cut. I wish I could chaff him."

"They expected royalty," Lady Anne persisted; "their mother told me so herself. The Duke sent six apostles in a box—he had no use for them himself."

"Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed," murmured Lady Dicky. "Why, there are the Elsen girls in the same old frocks. What a dowdy lot they are!"

"Poor dears, they have to get their mother off," said Lady Anne good-naturedly, and she went on to remark of the folly of wearing new gowns at a wedding.

"Every one sees you—they remember what you wore. The reporters don't let them forget. I could have boxed the ears of the man at Paquin's who put

me in the illustrated papers last week. A hundred guineas gone at one fell swoop, my dear."

"You don't mean to say you paid for it!" cried Lady Dicky from her perch.

Some one in the crowd round about cried "Hush!" and the response upon the saintly lips of the aged Lady Anne was lost to posterity for ever. That stately person, greatly affronted, put up her pince-nez and surveyed the crowd scornfully, intimating that if she knew the name of the offender she would have something particular to say to him. Presently she said quite loudly, "I do believe it was that black man," and she turned her gaze fiercely upon the striking face of a priest who sat behind her and was praying upon his knees. Lady Dicky, following her example, also stared the priest full in the face, but she had not the temerity to defy him. When next he looked at her, she was sitting at Lady Anne's side, and the two whispered their confidences.

"It's that man who calls himself Father Dominic."

"Escaped from Oxford or somewhere, hasn't he?" asked Lady Anne *sotto voce.*

"The one who says that we oughtn't to be divorced."

"Then what do they marry us for? Who's the man with him?"

"That's Lord Alcester's tutor, Mr. Rose. I suppose Percy is giving his sister away."

"He's always giving her away. Wasn't that Rose in love with her? They used to say so."

"Poor Alice! There have been so many——"

"Nothing to what there will be if all I hear is true! Why are they playing the 'Dead March,' or is it 'Lohengrin'? Oh, these weddings—I declare I prefer a funeral. Is that the bride? No, it's Lady Alcester.

Isn't she wonderful? She must be sixty if she's a day; her activity is as indecent as her waist."

"My dear Lady Anne, she's only fifty-three."

"And the sun and the moon stood still."

She was about to continue with some amiable reflections upon her hostess of the afternoon when the priest behind them said "Hush!" again; and he looked the Lady Anne so straight in the face, and his eyes were so very determined, that even that ancient dragon did not quite know how to deal with him. Shrugging her enormous shoulders contemptuously, and yet conscious of a good many eyes fixed upon her, she was perforce content with a snappish aside to Lady Dicky, in which she expressed surprise that the "mob" had been admitted to the ceremony. The loud pealing of the organ fortunately drowned her later observations; and now, indeed, the earnest priest was almost the only man in the building who did not rise to his feet to greet the bride, who appeared at the church door upon the arm of her brother, the Earl of Alcester. A slight, fragile blonde, shapely in figure, pale of face, the veil of white lace hid her from that more intimate inspection the curious might have desired; but a pair of quite remarkable blue eyes flashed their glances hither, thither, veiled as they were, and the face regained its colour when Quentin Caird, the bridegroom, took his stand beside her upon the altar steps, and the priest began to remind the dearly beloved of the purpose for which they were gathered together. This already had been prefaced by the sweet singing of the hardly used hymn "Oh, Perfect Love," and from that moment the spectators—for there were few worshippers—really condescended to discuss the 'Varsity match, Ranelagh, Paquin's, and the bride in whispers. Of all that crowd

there were but two who offered a silent prayer to the Almighty for those who knelt before God's altar. One was the priest—the other Philip Rose.

But while Father Dominic prayed for the woman and the man, Philip Rose remembered only the name of Alice, whom he had loved.

CHAPTER II

GOING AWAY

THE day had been distant since Lady Alcester occupied her little house in Berkeley Square (now let to the financier Moss, who calls himself Delaney), and the reception following her daughter's wedding was held by the "kind permission" of Lord Wilchester at his mansion in Piccadilly. Here the silver spoons, the biscuit boxes, the clocks, the jewellery, and the other paraphernalia of social recognition were displayed in a great room upon the first floor; so dark that, as Lady Anne remarked, something at five guineas would have been quite sufficient. And here Quentin Caird carried his bride when she had nodded and smiled to the many friends in the church, and the crowd at its door had been rewarded by a momentary vision of man and dress and the flashing eyes.

It was a commonplace to say that they were a handsome couple, for the same was said of ninety-nine of every hundred couples which passed from the altar of St. Paul's. If there were any criticisms, these indicated the merely carping or the venomously envious. One or two of the common people complained of Quentin Caird's face—handsome, but a little hard and serious, they said. He might have been a judge or barrister,

and the lack of a moustache undoubtedly gave him youthfulness. Then the bride was admittedly *petite*, and she stood no higher than his shoulder—just the right place for a woman to stand, as a cab-driver remarked. Quentin they measured at six feet, and his fortune was assessed at varying figures, according to the imagination and the authority of the assessor. While one said that his wealth had been derived from silver mines in Mexico, another put it down to a contract with the War Office. But all argued that he was rich beyond the fables, and an enormous housemaid at the church door declared to her lover (from the neighbouring barracks) that he appeared to be a "good sort."

Quentin himself was entirely unconscious of this scrutiny, and of that of his friends within the church. Throughout the whole of the tedious and quite unnecessarily plain-spoken service, his whole mind had been given to the girl at his side, to wonder at his possession of her, and, perhaps, to a haunting disbelief that such fortune could be true. Not by any means a servant of mere beauty in a woman, Alice stood to him for a heart and a soul and the emblem of finality in his own life. There was no sweeter word to be breathed aloud or whispered in the secret chambers of his heart than this word "wife." He had travelled a weary, exhausting road of life, but now he would rest and live. Such a sense of finality occupied him to the exclusion of all else. He did not see the people or hear the music. The set phrases of the office he repeated formlessly, save where they named the wife. Then his pulse quickened, and his eyes were full of a supreme tenderness. His wife—the companion of the years of rest and love! What honour, what worship did not such a sacrifice demand from him! He did not

believe that all the riches of the world could repay her for that which, in a humility which travail had put upon him, he called her sacrifice.

So he took his part in the ceremony, and, imitating his wife, he bowed and nodded to the gregarious hosts of the nave. In the carriage which took them to Piccadilly his first act was to bend and kiss his wife upon the lips. He did not speak to her, but she laughed lightly, and complained that he would tear her veil. Then he asked her if she would like the windows down, and she said that one of them would be enough. They spoke of the brightness of the day and of the people they had seen in the church. When, by accident, he mentioned Philip Rose, she flushed for an instant—not from any shame of remembrance, but because she did not wish to be reminded to-day that any other man had loved her. So he went on to speak of Lady Anne and of the young lady who had graced the ceremony by standing on the seat.

"Dicky was always ambitious," she said laughingly; "but I'm glad old Lady Anne was there. She will know that we are married now."

"While otherwise——"

"She would have confessed her doubts in dark corners."

"Estimable old girl! Does it seem very strange to you, Alice, to be my wife?"

"Why should it, Quentin? Am I not fulfilling my destiny?"

"Yes, but it must seem a little strange; I am quite incredulous."

"Oh," she said, with a laugh, "one is always incredulous of one's happiness; I shall soon be a terrible fact, Quentin. Did you see Father Dominic in the church?

He looked at me just as though I had been committing a crime."

"The crime of loving—is it that, dear?"

"Yes, yes," she said impulsively, "of loving with all my heart and soul, Quentin."

Her confession and his quick, affectionate recognition of it brought them to Lord Wilchester's house. They passed the scrutiny of eager eyes upon either side of the awning and entered the hall, where yawning footmen whispered behind their backs but bowed before them. Alice, flushed and anxious, ran upstairs to "have a peep at herself" before the others came, and Quentin, still strangely preoccupied, remained the single occupant of the great drawing-room.

Philip Rose, escaping from the press at the church door with what expedition he could, found himself walking to the house in the company of Father Dominic, the sallow-faced priest, who had just earned Lady Anne's scorn and had accepted it so courageously. The two men immediately fell to talking about the wedding, and while one was very curious to hear of the bridegroom, the other spoke with unwonted animation of the bride.

"You have known the family a great many years?" the priest began tentatively. Philip answered that his father and the old Earl were neighbours and friends.

"I've watched Alice from the pinafore stage," he said reflectively. "Of course one considers oneself quite privileged under such circumstances. If I say that I am anxious, it is merely to indicate an impulsive character which may lead a woman anywhere, up or down, right or left, as the whim takes her. Money will be the factor in this case. Here's a girl who has never known what it means to have the spending of five

hundred a year—she will now have the spending of ten thousand. Will she keep her head? I think that she will, but I cannot forget that she may not."

Father Dominic was not by any means inclined to be a pessimist.

"Money rarely ruins women," he said, and qualified the statement by adding—"at least the possession of money. I don't say that many a good girl has not been tempted by the promise of money. When she comes to possess it I don't think that it changes her character. From my observation, Lady Alice conceals a great many ambitions under a mask of girlish frivolity. She would probably have a mission in life if some event were sufficiently serious to get at the heart and not merely at the eyes. She has great opportunities—but so, I suppose, have we all, even if we do not possess a single sixpence. I certainly think that this should be a happy marriage, though I know nothing of Mr. Caird."

He put it as a question, and Philip did not hesitate to speak of the bridegroom.

"Oh, Caird's a mystery," he said; "to my way of thinking, he's quite too serious for Alice. His father left him eight hundred thousand—out of steel. He has the metal in his blood; you can see the man of iron nerve and purpose in every gesture. He'll try to reform the world while his wife is cutting other women out in Park Lane. That means a good deal of tension on the family rope, does it not?"

Father Dominic laughed good-humouredly.

"There is generally a good deal of tension upon ropes of that kind. Was not Mr. Caird in America, by the way?"

"Yes, for seven or eight years. He was in California, I believe. That's the mystery of it all. I once met an

American who told me that he was married out there, but I have never heard him mention his wife."

"Some people are greatly reticent to speak about the dead."

"Of course, but his wife should have been told. I know Alice well enough to say that if it is true, and he has kept it from her, she will never quite forgive him."

"I should doubt its truth—if it is true I make sure that she knows. It would be a sacred confidence between them."

Philip assented, though he did not pursue the subject any farther. Their walk had carried them within sight of Lord Wilchester's house, and Father Dominic remembered that he had not lunched.

"This West End is spoiling me," he said, with a sigh. "Everywhere I go I see the things which I ought to denounce, and I cannot resist them. Champagne is poison to me in the daytime, but I shall probably drink the bride's health in it. Then a good cigar—I really cannot think that a man's power of doing well in the world is any less because he smokes a good cigar, do you?"

"Far from it, since most things end the same way—in smoke. Come with me, and I will show you the best weeds. I helped Alcester to buy them."

They entered the house briskly. The hall was now a blaze of colour—the air was alive with the babble of musical voices. Costly gowns, the firstfruits of the French harvest, swept the stairs with a delicious rustling of silk petticoats. Through open doors one had a glimpse of nodding feathers and gloved hands and glittering glass. Groups were everywhere—upon the stairs, in the conservatory, about every table. The refreshment-room enjoyed the favour of the aged par-

ticularly; and here the stout Lady Anne, taking a snack for the second time, found herself face to face with Father Dominic, and immediately declared war upon him.

"Do take some champagne," she said, when Philip had introduced them; "you must be thirsty after your exertions."

"My dear lady," he replied, "I am helpless before a bad example."

"Is it true that you are not going to let us get any more divorces?" she asked him with blunt persistency.

"Oh!" he said, "Sir Francis Jeune is the best judge of that."

The Lady Anne admitted to the Lady Dicky at a later moment that she "liked the parson"; but this was when Quentin and his wife were about to leave, and all the company crowded into the great hall to see them go. Every one had risen now, and the Lady Dicky particularly distinguished herself by slyly inserting a handful of rice between the neck and the collar of the Reverend Joshua Hurry, who was engaged in a pretty discussion upon the Sarum ritual with Ellen, the bride's elder sister. This was the moment also when the skittish Lady Alcester of the wasp's waist searched the recesses of her emotions for a single tear wherewith to signify her grief at the loss of her daughter. "It is like losing one's very self!" she declared to Lady Anne, who promptly suggested to Father Dominic that a large reward need not be offered in their hostess's case. "They would certainly return her," she said—and the priest said "Hush!"

Quentin wore a dark suit of striped flannel to go away in, and for once in a way his friends found him utterly frivolous. He spoke of a possible journey to America,

"to get away from you all." They would stop at Dover to-night and be in Paris to-morrow. Of course, Paris was an utterly impossible place in June, and that was why they were going there. He begged them not to send him newspapers, and promised to answer their letters upon his return. Alice, on her part, seemed equally at her ease, and was not behind him in flippant farewell. Her travelling dress was of a dark blue spotted silk, a colour which emphasised the whiteness of her skin and the rich shade of brown in her hair; she wore a French hat, with one great feather encircling it, and carried a light feather stole about her shoulders. Such sentiment as Alice possessed was not for public display. She kissed her mother lightly upon the cheek, and promised to write when she arrived in Paris. For her sister Ellen she had but a peck. The one was taken and the other left—to the doubtful possibilities of the Reverend Joshua Hurry.

Quentin and his wife made a rush for the carriage at last. The rice fell like a shower of hail; there was a hearty cheer following upon the successful launching of the white shoe. In the hall behind them a small mirror, brushed by Lady Anne's ample shoulders, fell to the ground and was broken. Some one said that it was an evil omen, and the Lady Anne agreed.

"If that had happened at my wedding," the old lady remarked genially, "I should have believed the worst."

CHAPTER III

THROUGH THE MISTS

It was Alice's idea that Quentin should smoke his last cigar that night out by the seashore at Dover, and he obeyed her very willingly. A mighty army of dead and forgotten husbands must have done the same thing, he told her seriously; and besides, could he not see her shadow upon the blind? On her part, she carried herself already as though she had been married a decade; and she flattered herself that the damning evidence of the rice had been completely obliterated at Victoria. Their dinner was a light and frivolous reunion, just such another as they had enjoyed so many times at the Carlton or the Savoy during the London season. They talked of anything but the ceremony of the day; and, as Alice said, "who could possibly guess"—in which hazard a cynic might have answered her that the hotel had been perfectly aware of the circumstance from the beginning, as it is the habit of hotels to be.

Quentin watched her run upstairs without once looking back at him; and greatly proud of her, as he always had been, he lighted his cigar and took a "turn by the beach." The night of June was cold, with a slight mist upon the sea. The light at the pier shone out through a haze which caught the flash of it and passed it on to the

lazy waves in prismatic hues, changing and beautiful. A band played in the hotel he had left, and the ear caught the strains of one of Strauss's waltzes lazily interpreted as Englishmen interpret them. To this in mellow cadences the sea added something of the harmonies; and Quentin found himself casting back, in spite of himself, to those tides of the distant years he believed he had forgotten. What a strenuous life his had been! How full of effort and of struggle! And the tragedy of it—the love, the despair, the hope! To-day he turned a page and began to write anew. The doubt remained, however, whether he could obliterate the past wholly as he desired.

Philip Rose had surmised that if Quentin had really been married in America, and had told Alice nothing of it, there would be trouble in the days to come. In this he was quite unnecessarily premature, for the whole story had been told at the beginning, and there was no fact of it now to be confessed. If there had been a reservation, it concerned that which a man might justly conceal. When Quentin married Isabella Montanes eight years ago in San Francisco he was living on the income of a penny-a-liner, as he did not hesitate to tell you. A Bohemian existence claimed for him a Bohemian wife. Half Spanish, half American, Isabella had been entirely the slave of wild passions and a mad ambition. Impulse led her to share her want of fortune with the dare-devil Englishman; disgust drove her from him when she discovered that he had a creed of life and a will which clung to principle. Their separation was natural and unavoidable. The woman turned to the theatre, the man to the fields. When he learned of her death in Paris it seemed as though fetters had been struck from his limbs. And yet, here at Dover, with

the voice of the woman he loved still in his ears, Quentin thought first of Isabella Montanes, and the remembrance could stir his heart oddly and with a pleasure he was unwilling to define.

She had been a mad creature, passionate, uncontrollable, clever, amusing. Her ceaseless desire of excitement pleased him at first, but finally wearied him. When he recalled her image, it was that of a dark-eyed, white-skinned girl clinging about his knees, or crying out for his love and pity. They had called her "La Esmeralda" in Paris, and he, Quentin, had been the husband of the shadows. It remained for him to shut these pages of his memory for ever, and to write her story anew ; he believed that Alice, his wife, would help him to do that. A judge of character and clear in his own purpose, he had married Lady Alcester's daughter, despite the sneers of his enemies and the more prudent counsels of his friends. Her poverty attracted him, her capacity for enjoyment pleased him. She was vain, yes ; but vanity would sit well at his table. He desired her success in London, and would do his best to encourage it. Such reflections followed him as he walked by the seashore and looked up from time to time at the shadow on the blind. His love for his wife was sure and very real. The hour helped him to lay stress upon Alice's charm, her cleverness, and her great affection for him. He carried back to the hotel at last a lover's dream, and the face of the shadows vanished in the mists.

CHAPTER IV

HALLUCINATION

QUENTIN believed that there was an art of the honeymoon, and he practised it diligently during the seven days they stayed in Paris. He had already discovered that Alice cared nothing for what is commonly known as sight-seeing; and while he himself would very willingly have given a day to the Louvre and the picture galleries, he concealed his wish, and planned only for her enjoyment.

"What shall it be to-day, Alice?" he asked her each morning when the early coffee was drunk and she had put on the finishing touches preparatory to their morning walk. Perchance, he himself had already been up a couple of hours and made a tour of the Bois—but he did not complain that she could not imitate him in this. And her answer to his question was always the same—"Oh, let us go and look at the shops. The porter will tell us where to breakfast." The naïvety of it amused Quentin. He wondered how many of the pretty baubles purchased because "mother would like that" would ever reach Lady Alcester's dressing-room.

But he looked at the shops nevertheless, and even accompanied Alice into spacious showrooms, where bevies of pretty girls tried on hats for his benefit and

declared that every size, shape, and fashion was just the thing for "madame." The jewellers in the Rue de la Paix learned to know him well, and came from their lairs with diamonds in their hands directly their scouts observed him. The morning of the fifth day found him engaged upon the same occupation. Alice was ready to walk at eleven o'clock. They turned down the Faubourg St. Honoré and so into the Place de la Madeleine. She was all eyes for the shop windows, but he wished to talk of their future.

"If we get on to Switzerland," he began, "we might have a week at Champéry and then go on to Chamonix. It's a ridiculous thing that a man who has travelled as much as I have should never have seen Mont Blanc. But I haven't, Alice, though I don't confess it in public."

"Never confess anything in public, dear," she said lightly, "it's safer not. When I haven't been to a place I read it up in the guide-books. You can always talk about it then. Colonel Dene was telling me the other day that I knew Vienna like a book. He was quite right; I did."

"But you want to go to Switzerland, don't you?"

"Oh, if you do, dearest. Of course, it's awfully common now. We shan't meet any one we know, and that's something. One can't well go to Homburg before August, can one? Mother is to be there in the last week of July; but, you see, she has Ellen to marry."

He walked on a little way in silence. He was not thinking of Ellen's marriage, but only of this new social slavery which drives gregariously, and is the foe of all solitude.

"Switzerland certainly is vulgarised," he admitted presently; "but, after all, nature can stand a lot of

that. I should much like to compare Valais with California. Do you really think it will bore you, Alice?"

"With you, dear Quentin! Of course, we shall go. Just look at those emeralds. Aren't they perfectly lovely? Mother used to have a fine set, but they went. Don't ask me where? I always think that emeralds are the most beautiful stones that exist. Some day, when you are very rich, you shall buy me an emerald necklace; but I won't let you yet."

They had strolled round to the Rue de la Paix by this time, and she pulled him up before a window wherein a magnificent pendant of emeralds reposed on a yellow velvet cushion. Quentin knew that she was not really greedy, but all this praise of the jewels was the reaction from that life of grinding poverty and self-denial with which she was familiar. He offered to buy her the pendant, but she would not let him enter the shop.

"I positively will not wear them!" she said decisively. "If we go on like this, I shall be afraid to look in the shops. And I'm so hungry, Quentin; I'm dying for my breakfast."

He permitted himself to be led away, and they returned to Durand's, and engaged a table in the corner by the window. During their breakfast Alice talked of the plans for the autumn, when they should visit and where they should stay. Quentin's home in Shropshire pleased her particularly, but she did not think she would care much for his bungalow in Sussex; and as for golf, she positively hated it.

"What we must do, dear," she said decisively, "is to keep our shooting parties in mind. No one will come to you to play golf, but you can catch any one with a shoot.

I like Knowl Manor, and we must make it famous. It doesn't matter at all if people don't hunt as long as you can give them shooting and bridge. Really, dearest, you must play bridge. One is out of everything if one does not. The great thing is to choose one's people well, and never to ask the half of a flirtation. If we begin with the Duke and ask Mrs. Kenneth to meet him, it's sure to go. We can have the dowdy people in Sussex if you must go there at all."

Her chatter amused Quentin very much, though her social gospel was far from being his own.

"I suppose our friends come in somewhere, Alice?—you don't seem to remember them."

"Oh, they come at odd times! If one is going to campaign, it doesn't do to think too much of old acquaintances. That's serious—I'm as fond of my friends as any one, though I never associate them with a house-party. If one goes in for the thing at all, one should go in for it heart and soul. Otherwise one might as well be in a monastery."

"Perhaps better, if the monks were good-looking."

"Well—you know, I mean a nunnery."

"Not quite the same thing; I cannot imagine you there at all. The dress wouldn't suit you, to begin with, and the Lady Superior would certainly go no trumps without an ace. Don't think of it, Alice; there are other vocations."

"I really believe you'd like me to settle down to a humdrum life in a rectory with a mother's meeting every Tuesday. Have you any social ambition at all, Quentin?"

"Possibly it lingers in dark corners. I should like to see you shine, Alice; but for myself, I would much sooner play a good round. It's much the same thing,

isn't it? I play to put a ball into a hole, and you to put a hole in some one else's ball. You'll do that easily enough—I shall see you in the illustrated papers as a queen of hostesses next year. Heaven knows how proud I should be of your success."

He turned affectionate, searching eyes upon her; and his love stirred a real response in her heart. Gowned in a dainty robe of lace and chiffon, and wearing a great feathered hat, her baby face could flush at his words, and her eyes, which were her best possession, flashed up to him a look full of a young girl's tenderness and homage. Here was the strong bowing to the weak; but the weak was fully aware of his strength and of the courtesy nature of her victory.

"I should only like to be successful if you like it," she said earnestly. "Do you know, Quentin, I always felt that I should succeed if I had the chance. You have given that to me, and I am very grateful, dear. Of course, all this is only a part of one's life. The rest is for ourselves; and that is the better part. I want you to be so happy with me—I shall strive for that always, dearest."

"There is no need to strive, little wife—you have given it to me already. I can't at all understand what I was ten years ago, before I knew you. The world seems altogether changed—I often think that I am not the same man."

"That's another compliment to me, Quentin—do you remember the first you paid to me?"

"When I said that you made me forget that I had lived in America?"

"Yes, and you were such an American then. I believe you adored the American girl—now, be honest—you did?"

"As a commercial aspect of marriage, I thought her delightful. I should like to meet the wives of all my American friends just once."

"Meaning inconstancy?"

"To a certain type of American idea, yes. They are charming women, but the mould is not changed often enough. Their country is going to rule the universe, and the American girl is going to rule the country. In the art of dress every woman in England, except my wife, is ten years behind them. They talk splendidly."

He broke off, saying, "Hush! we are observed." A party of Americans had come to a neighbouring table, and the women of it were already tuning up their voices. Quentin paid his bill a little abashed, and took Alice from the restaurant. In the street he asked her if she would not like to go to Versailles; but the sudden listlessness of eye and change of manner betokened her want of interest.

"Let us drive, dear," she said; "let us drive in the Bois. I positively hate palaces."

"It was just an idea," he replied. "We'll go back to Ritz's and get an electric brougham. Versailles, after all, is not much of a place for those who love the honour of women. Think of the ghosts——"

"Yes, and all of them women. How they must envy our fashions! Would you have cared to live in those times, Quentin?"

"As the small boy said when they asked him if he would sooner be Kitchener or Napoleon—Kitchener, because Napoleon's dead. We'll go and drive in the Bois, little girl, and try to think that people aren't so wicked nowadays."

"It's a great effort, Quentin," she said archly; and

with that she ran upstairs to get ready for the drive.

They drove for two hours in the Bois, then almost deserted by the true Parisian, who was at Dieppe or Trouville, or his château in the West. Afterwards there was rest in their little room overlooking the court-yard and the fountain. They dined early, for Alice had set her mind on going to Olympia, whose *pièce de résistance*, flaring from every hoarding, was "The Man in the Moon" upon the biograph. Her desire to see a little of the "shady side" of Paris amused Quentin, but he would not gratify it. "You cannot touch pitch," he put it to her; and so she sighed consent, and said it should be "The Man in the Moon." The hotel people engaged a box for them, and when they had dined with the millionaires at the Ritz, they drove to the quasi music-hall, and found themselves at ten o'clock waiting for the *chef d'œuvre* which had so excited their curiosity.

Alice had never been in such a place as Olympia—old Lady Alcester avoided all scenes where husbands did not abound—and her first impressions of this mild dissipation were by no means pleasing. The terrible tobacco smoke, the unpleasant people who came and grouped themselves at the back of her box, the tawdry dress and the exertions of a stout comédienne upon the stage were by no means her ideal of the gay city. She looked at Quentin a little reproachfully, and was half of the mind to return to the hotel again.

"Now is this really the way you men enjoy yourselves?" she asked him, when her wraps were spread out upon the chair and the programme had been carefully read. Quentin admitted that there were other means.

"Give them a cigar and a pretty woman to look at, and they will go anywhere. I confess that this is scarcely a place of delight. That lady sings a whole tone flat, and is too stout for my notion of a shepherdess—but, you see, these people like her."

"Yes, and what people, too! Look at that horrid fat man with the little girl in black. He must understand the song; I don't. Is it very funny, Quentin?"

"My dear girl, I can't make out anything, except that the lady imagines she is tending sheep at Longchamp."

"Is she going back to them soon, Quentin? Why, there's Bobby Fenton, Dicky's friend! I wonder who's with him."

"I shouldn't ask if I were you, Alice. It's astonishing how short-sighted some people get when they are in Paris. The fair shepherdess is departing, you see. Our bliss is at an end."

"There's a Spanish ballet next—isn't there? I wonder if they are really Spaniards!"

"Born in the Butte Montmartre and lately christened for the purpose. They will probably be Circassians next week."

"But it's a very pretty scene, isn't it?"

She pointed to the stage, where the lifted curtain now revealed a picture of the Alhambra in Spain. There was a fountain in the centre of a Moorish courtyard, and upon the edge of the fountain, defying immersion, sat an elderly priest, who was evidently about to put a gipsy to the torture. When demons in the dress of the Misereri at Rome had danced a jig with hot irons and pincers, and the gipsy's doom was imminent, other gipsies were let down by cords from the ruined walls above, and to the number of twenty they danced before

the hated inquisitor. This so played upon the old gentleman's amorous susceptibilities that he finally released the fair heretic, banished the demons, and joined in a kind of cachucha himself.

Alice's excellent sense of humour permitted her to enjoy this grotesque entertainment thoroughly, but Quentin seemed but ill pleased with it, and once or twice when she looked up at his face, she thought him very pale and preoccupied. Presently, to her great surprise, he bent down and began to feel for his hat.

"Would you mind going home, dear?" he said quietly. "I think this smoke is a little too much for me."

Alice rose at once and began to put on her wraps. All the young wife in her was greatly alarmed.

"I am so sorry, dear," she said, watching him with frightened eyes. "We won't wait a minute longer—why didn't you tell me before?"

He said that it was nothing; and in the fresh air of the Boulevard he breathed more freely.

"I am very stupid in a close atmosphere sometimes," he explained, seeking to re-assure her. "If you don't mind, we'll walk back to the hotel, dear."

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed eagerly, and then, with a woman's gentle sympathy, she said, "I shall take you to a doctor to-morrow, dearest; you must be careful for my sake."

He tried to laugh at her fears, but his manner was still awkward and restrained. Not for the half of his fortune would he have told her of the absurd fancy which had come to him while he saw the Spaniards dancing. For prominent amongst them, unmistakable as he would have sworn, was the face and the figure of his dead wife, Isabella.

Quentin knew that it was all imagination, but the hallucination haunted him for many weeks, and months passed before he ceased to be affrighted by his impressions of that night, or to dream in his sleep that Isabella Montanes still lived in Paris.

BOOK II

THE SECRET

CHAPTER V

A MISSION TO THE RICH

In the month of May following the wedding of Quentin Caird and the Lady Alice Vandemere, Philip Rose, sometime tutor to Percy Earl of Alcester, returned from the Continent after an absence of more than seven months. He brought with him his customary reticence, a bronzed face, and the two sons of a Lincolnshire squire, whom he had diligently instructed in the elements of Paris and the first principles of Riviera tours. Having seen these promising youths safely into the train for Leicester, Philip turned his cab westward with the purpose of calling upon old Lady Alcester, and of hearing all the newest scandal that was going. The journey carried him through Curzon Street toward Piccadilly, and he was passing down the former when a brass plate upon a shabby door attracted his eye, and he remembered instantly that here was the home of that "mission to the rich" which the young Oxford scholar, Father Dominic, had started some two years ago. Without a moment's hesitation, Philip descended

at the house, and, being fortunate enough to find the priest at home, he was soon exchanging with him such honest gossip as honest men love.

"Of course I want to hear about every one," he said. "How is the old Countess—particularly how is her daughter? They tell me she has made a great social success. Is it true or false? I thought she would do it, but one never likes to pose as a prophet."

This question he asked in a simply furnished room upon the ground floor. Father Dominic was a very mild ritualist, and there were few religious emblems in the house. Philip thought that a silver cigarette-box was quite the *chef d'œuvre* of the parlour wherein they talked, and he could not help contrasting the dignity and sufficiency of this home with the gorgeous modernity of those he was accustomed to visit in London. Father Dominic himself wore a black cassock; but there was nothing of the monk about him, nor did he affect a vulgar and advertising asceticism. These two met as men and scholars, speaking of old friends in quiet confidence.

"The Countess is amazingly well," the priest began; "some one taught her to turn tables, and she is now a clairvoyant. If you go there she will conjure up the spirits of dead pirates for you. They tell me that she is devoted to her son-in-law, though he is an unbeliever in this matter—Mr. Caird, I understand, cares nothing for spirits. He is generally out when she calls."

"I can imagine it. He probably keeps a running diary of her movements in his cheque-book. They tell me he is in Scotland. I wonder how his wife likes that—at the height of the season?"

"Apparently it does not distress her. She is entertaining in Berkeley Square almost every day. They

have taken Lord Wilchester's house for the season. I saw her there on Monday—she had time to give me two fingers before racing away to the Park. The same night I read that she was at the Opera, and afterwards at old Lady Anne's *soirée*. The men seem delighted with her——"

"Better the men than the man, my dear fellow. It's specialisation which leads to so much of this modern mischief."

"And the fact that people believe in nothing—not even in themselves. If I could make them begin there, I should have hopes. They talk of this and that being out of date; but what is really out of date is self-respect. And, of course, there are gross exaggerations everywhere."

"I know it; none of us is safe. If I asked half the women I know what they thought of you, I should hear gossip enough to make a novel. The modern woman thinks that every other woman is worse than herself, and so she advances the index finger of her own conduct a peg onwards. This is general, and scarcely applies to our friend. Does Quentin like all this running about? But I imagine not from what you tell me."

"He is her slave, heart and soul, I believe. A tolerant slave, naturally. I think he is one of those clever men who knows that shams have always been and must always be. He certainly is not jealous of her —though the women say that she flirts outrageously."

"Possibly they are right; but this flirtation is as often as not pure vanity."

"It begins with that—unfortunately, the ending is not always so innocent."

"I agree—the horse takes the bit and the leap—ust to see what is on the other side."

"And the fall is there for all the field to see. But you will see this particular meet for yourself—you are going to call, are you not?"

"I am on my way there now. There is no news of Ellen's engagement, I suppose?"

"Lady Alcester weeps over her failure. It seems that it must be the curate after all."

"Then Quentin will have to buy him a living. He may die a bishop, who knows?"

"Unless he resigns and goes to the War Office. Are you, yourself, staying in town long?"

"Oh, I'm like Squeers—waiting for the young idea to shoot. If you can find me a rich pup, I shall be obliged to you."

Father Dominic laughed.

"The rich pups nowadays do not go well in the leash," he said drily; "but, of course, I shall not forget."

Philip thanked him, and remembering that his cab was waiting, he excused himself and continued his journey. His desire to see old Lady Alcester had already abated, and he now directed the man to drive him straight to Berkeley Square. Unwittingly, the priest had provoked his curiosity. What were these flirtations of which he spoke? Was it possible that Alice did not love Quentin after all? The news excited him. He believed that he had forgotten how much he had once loved Quentin's wife; but he greatly resented the insinuation that others were less forgetful. His desire to see was paramount above any other gratification London could afford him.

CHAPTER VI

A CUP OF TEA

LONDON was very full as Philip drove through it; a long stream of carriages rolled westward to the Park, and Piccadilly teemed with life. In Berkeley Square a clash of "At homes" almost blocked the mouth of Bruton Street, and Philip left his cab at the corner and pushed through a gaping throng of nurse girls and messenger boys to Lady Alcester's door. A smart electric brougham stood there, the front door of the house was open, and just when Philip was about to ring, Alice herself came out and greeted him with delighted amazement.

"Why, it's Philip!" she cried—they had called each other by their Christian names since childhood; "my dear, good man, wherever have you been?"

She held his hand in hers while she spoke, and both of them blushed because the pleasure of the *rencontre* was so little concealed. He thought her greatly improved by marriage. Her gown was a masterpiece; she seemed like some pretty bird whose wings were of lace and chiffon, and whose crown was a superb pink feather. The clearness of her skin and the art with which her pretty brown hair had been dressed would have spoken of a "maid" to a woman; but to the man it betrayed nothing. He would not have given her a

day more than eighteen years, though he knew her to be twenty-three.

"Oh, I've been knocking around with two pups!" he said, letting her hand go reluctantly. "How are you all? How's Quentin and your mother?"

"Quentin is at the end of a line," she said firmly; "he's fishing—so am I. Come upstairs and tell me what you think about me. You were always plain-spoken, Philip. Mother's there—she'll be delighted to see you."

"Oh, but you were going out, Alice."

"Am I not allowed to change my mind?"

"To change other people's used to be your function. I hope you're growing serious."

"As a great, big, horrid judge—not in *the* court, you know."

"Which court is that?"

"Oh, there's only one that troubles our friends."

They laughed together and entered the drawing-room. Old Lady Alcester, gossiping with an elderly and exceedingly bold cavalier, was in majestic possession. She also welcomed Philip effusively. He observed that her waist was more miraculous than ever and the rouge upon her cheeks more palpable.

"Why, it's the schoolmaster!" she cried gaily—"the very man of all others; come here at once and teach my General arithmetic. He says that two and one are three—they don't make them that nowadays, do they, Philip? Wherever have you been to, young man, to bring that bronzed face back with you? Just sit down at once and tell us all about it."

Philip took a seat by Alice's side upon the sofa, and gave a short account of his experiences in the instruction and moral teaching of youth.

"I took them to Paris to inculcate virtue," he said; "to Italy for activity, to Germany for manners. Now I have brought them back to England to finish their education in football and the refined arts. They will shortly marry and settle down."

"Ah," said the General affably, "nowadays we generally marry to settle up."

"The same thing, my dear sir—if we marry at all. Statistics are not encouraging, though I should think that Lady Alice has done something for them."

He turned to her and took a cup of tea from her hand. Their eyes met in a frank glance, which exchanged the confidence of years. He knew that she liked him, and he was afraid neither for himself nor for her.

"Quentin, I suppose, is not very fond of travelling?" he said.

"He walks miles after a golf ball," the old lady cut in.

"And the social side——?"

"Mine?" said Alice brightly; "he really admits that I am a success. Think of it, he was more than five minutes in this room at my last party. By and by I may get him as far as Ranelagh."

"Then you have hopes for him?"

"There is always hope for a man; he is so changeable."

"And you like all this—it really does amuse you?"

He asked the question in a lower tone; she understood that it was serious, and so treated it.

"Yes—it really does amuse me. I am just the woman for it, Philip. Don't you remember, I could never sit still even as a child?"

"I remember a good deal. Dolls were married rather frequently in those days."

"So they are now—children's games are dreadfully real."

"And supremely innocent?"

"Innocence is oftentimes ignorance; we don't change very much with the years, Philip."

"Except to grow younger—some of us. How does Quentin bear the strain? Is the silver streak apparent?"

"Quentin believes in the sanctity of the home tie—that is why he is generally away fishing. We are both shockingly independent."

"Two roads, I suppose, with an occasional footpath to join them. Well, I understand that he can read about you in the newspapers."

"Yes, it's horrid; they actually speak of me as a professional beauty."

"While beauty nowadays is a trade."

"Quentin hates it. He is old-fashioned enough to believe in the privacy of private life and other creeds which came out of the Ark."

"I can quite understand that Ararat is a little public for him. When do you expect him home, Alice?"

"To-day, to-morrow—just when I say he isn't coming. Of course I don't mind a bit. We both understand each other thoroughly."

"Lucky people!"

Lady Alcester caught the word "lucky," and instantly chimed in with a reminiscence.

"Ah, talking of luck, Elizabeth Reed, the clairvoyant, told me a strange thing yesterday. She said that if I would look at my crystal, I would learn something of my boy Percival."

"And did you?" the General asked banteringly.

"My dear General, I saw gold as plainly as I see your face."

"What an unfamiliar and exhilarating spectacle!"

"Yes, gold; and after that a black shadow. These things terrify me. The unseen world is very awful."

'Then it's very lucky that we can't see it. I wish one of your spooks would show me where I can discount a bill."

"Materialist—and all this great unknown waiting for us to speak!"

"Through a table leg—divine channel. Isn't that it? You hold a pretty woman's hand and she inspires you."

"And you begin to think about gold," said Philip sardonically.

Alice tapped him upon the arm, and he realised that the old lady must be humoured. Lady Alcester told an astonishing story of a dead husband whose spirit had spoken through a satin-wood table, and told his wife of a great danger menacing her. Exactly three months afterwards the lady lost a thousand at Monte Carlo. Philip said "Wonderful," and asked Alice what she was going to do when the season was over.

"Rest," she said, decisively—"a month at Homburg and then Knowl Manor. Quentin wants a fortnight's golf in Sussex and I shall make myself a martyr. You must come to some of our big parties—it will be just a rush when the shooting begins."

"And you call that resting?"

"Of course I do. Would you have me go to Bad Manheim and lie up?"

"Not for worlds. I shall take you at your word, and come to Knowl if I am in England."

"Don't go away again—I miss you, Philip."

"A compliment—for your sake I will go to the workhouse to a slow strain."

"Come to Ranelagh instead," she said brightly. "Dicky drives down with me to-morrow. We'll dine and have a jolly time. Mother will be there."

"Nothing would delight me more. At what time?"

"The car will be here at half-past two."

"I will be on your doorstep as the clock strikes."

"But it doesn't strike, Philip—and I do believe it's six o'clock. I shall miss the Park."

"Overwhelming tragedy—well, I am going on. Remember me most cordially to Quentin."

"At half-past two," she said.

So Philip resumed his journey to his old rooms in Clement's Inn. But as he went he thought much of Alice, of her charm and sweetness, and the great position she had come to occupy.

"She is vain and pretty and she is much alone," he said to himself. "Well, Quentin is a fool—an arrant fool. I will tell him so when I meet him."

But he never did tell him; for this is just one of the things a man does not speak about even to a friend.

CHAPTER VII

THE LUST OF SPEED

ALICE was the owner of a pretty "fifteen-horse" Brooke amongst other cars; and in this she drove her friends Lady Dicky and Philip Rose to Ranelagh on the following afternoon. Her chauffeur, a Frenchman by name Emile, would greatly have preferred to drive the party himself; but on this point his mistress was decided.

"What is the good of a car if you can't kill somebody?" she said to Philip; "of course I shall drive. Dicky isn't nervous, and I am sure you are not."

"My dear Alice, I would follow to the end of the earth—or shall we say to the bottom of the deepest ditch?"

"You will say nothing of the kind. Dicky sits at my side; you will go in the tonneau with Emile—I don't listen when Dicky talks, but you would upset us. And mind you don't tread on the hat-box—one can't dine in veils at Ranelagh."

"Suggests a nunnery, I suppose. Well, I am very obedient. Tell me when to jump for life, that's all."

The day was altogether charming; so, said Philip, was the party. The girls wore the lightest, most bewitching gowns beneath their fawn motor coats. The round hat suited Alice's baby face, and the veil was not

thick enough to conceal the brightness of her eyes. Radiant sunshine, a performance and not a promise of summer invited frivolity and light hearts. And Alice's driving was worthy of the Paris-Bordeaux, as the Frenchman admitted. To see her shapely foot upon the pedals, to watch the tiny fingers upon the lever of the change-speed gear; to note the serious way in which she pumped oil from the brass lubricator into the cylinder or marked the height of the pressure gauge was in itself no inconsiderable entertainment. Philip, indeed, perceived a new side to her character. He knew her for a witty girl; but here she showed him plainly that the grasp of mechanical detail was not beyond her. And her driving was superb, if a little over-daring. He held his breath more than once before they arrived at Hammersmith. The repartee of the omnibus driver fell on deaf ears. Philip was wondering where he would be if the car turned over.

There was really no cause for alarm; but he was young at the pastime, and unaccustomed to that power of brake and wheel which serves a motor so well in the press of traffic. When the car seemed about to hurl itself upon an offending furniture van or came to a dead stop within two feet of a perambulator, he instinctively clutched the rail and prayed for deliverance. Nor was he greatly delighted when, Hammersmith Bridge being crossed, Alice offered to give him a run on the "third" just to see "her move." "She"—the gallant Brooke—certainly responded kindly to the invitation. Her engine ceased to grunt and began to hum. The rush of the wind by the ears was like a roaring cataract. And the girl herself—her eyes blazing, her body slightly bent—what a subject, Philip thought, for an ideal of speed. How she revelled in it! What desire of life, movement,

supremacy did it not reveal! Here was a new passion, a lust for pace, a neurotic witness to the age. The car leaped on, devouring roads, lanes, commons; country drivers of jogging horses sent curses flying after it; pedestrians drew back upon the footways—cyclists were enveloped in clouds of dust. Nothing counted, no one was of any consequence. The goal was unknown and the speed was furious beyond the knowledge of the Acts.

The excitement of this mad flight carried them some miles from Ranelagh; and when Alice suddenly recollected the object of her journey she put the brake pedal down sharply, and, the road being newly watered, the car suddenly skidded violently, as cars will upon slippery roads. Emile, the chauffeur, stood up in his seat directly control of the steering wheels was lost; and he conjured unknown French gods in emphatic phrases. Lady Dicky made no bones about it—she screamed, and tried to clutch the steering wheel. Philip himself, unacquainted with a "side-slip," thought that the machinery had broken down, and he found himself "sitting back and swearing" as a man does in the hunting field when he knows that his horse is going to "peck." The only person entirely unconcerned was Alice herself. "Sit still!" she cried to them. And she kept her hands upon the wheel while the car plunged like a mad horse, swerved upon its front axis, turned completely round, and ran backward into a high grass bank. The jar of the concussion threw them all forward in their seats. Emile leapt to the ground, and began to examine his engine—Lady Dicky, whose face retained but its stars of rouge, abated her outcry, and sat there as white as death. But the driver herself could see the jest of it and laugh.

"I shall hate you for that, Philip!"

"I do believe I've cut my hand," she cried, holding it up for their pity. "Wasn't it lucky we didn't run into that funeral! That's the second glide we've had in a month. I wonder how much there is to pay."

To the Lady Dicky she said—

"Oh, don't make a fuss, Dicky; you know you aren't hurt."

"I said all my prayers at once," gasped that awed young lady. "It was just like a roundabout, Alice."

Philip told her that as far as he went he was never more comfortable in his life, though he said to himself that he would give twenty pounds of his hard-earned savings to be safely landed on the turf at Ranelagh. A close inspection of the car proved that it had received no other damage than a bent rear axle and a smashed panel. Emile's beloved engine did not cease to work during the whole performance, and when Philip had bound up Alice's hand in his handkerchief he suggested that the chauffeur should now take the wheel. The suggestion was received with fine scorn.

"I shall hate you for that, Philip!" she said, with real meaning; "any one may have a side-slip. Gabrielle himself could not prevent it."

"Are you referring to the archangel, Alice?"

"I am referring to the driver who runs the big Mors car—if you were not two years behind the times you would know."

"Ah, the times are too fast for me. I prefer the legal limit. Your hand is hurting you, all the same. You had better let the man drive."

"I would die where I sit first."

"That's what we all seemed about to do five minutes ago. Well, as you like, if Lady Dicky doesn't mind."

"I am in transports of joy, and I should like a

brandy-and-soda!" said Lady Dicky, whose face obstinately refused to recover its colour.

The argument was not prolonged. Alice turned the car in the direction of Ranelagh, and in five minutes was going faster than ever.

"She'll drive like that through life," said Philip, as he watched her; "and some day she'll have a big spill."

CHAPTER VIII

THE ONLY SON

THEY met hosts of friends at Ranelagh, and found old Lady Alcester there. Alice was lost to Philip in a moment in that press of well-gowned women and amusing men. An ancient buck, one Colonel Dene, instantly took possession of her, in spite of the fact that his authority was contested by quite a troop of younger gallants who hovered about the pretty figure like moths about a candle. Lady Alcester herself waited for her favourite General; but she welcomed Philip enthusiastically none the less, and began at once to tell him of her troubles.

"Oh, my dear man, what a world it is! Let us go and look at the polo. We can't be seen here. Is that General Oscar on the steps?—no; then he ought to be ashamed of himself. I want to speak to you of my son Percival."

Nearly three years had passed since Philip brought Percival from Paris, and handed him over to the custody of a dean and tutor at Trinity College in Cambridge. As he had predicted an early journey to the dogs for this promising boy, he never failed to hear of him with interest.

"Well," he said, when they were seated by the polo

ground, "and what has the Earl been doing now to annoy your ladyship?"

"Doing? Why the whole town is talking of it—Daisy Thane—the dancing-girl at the Prince's. You must have heard of it?"

Philip smiled good-naturedly.

"He's in love with her, I suppose. Don't tell me they are engaged."

"God forbid! but he's deserting his duties at Cambridge disgracefully. Three times in London last week, and every time at the theatre. Say what you make of that, and I'll answer you."

Philip avoided the question. He was still smiling. Perhaps he thought of the crystal in which this doting mother had seen gold for her son. He remembered that Daisy Thane's hair was spoken of as golden. The blacker shadows should be those of the counsel prosecuting for breach of promise.

"Encourage it, my dear lady," he said blandly; "do all in your power to bring it about. Even invite the lady to your house."

"To my house! The man's mad!"

"We are all mad nowadays—at least, the faculty declares it to be so. If you don't encourage Master Percival, he will certainly marry the lady."

"On eight hundred a year! That's all he's likely to get unless his brother-in-law makes him an allowance."

"The fact should be represented to Miss Thane at the proper moment and in the proper light."

"Ah, that's the limelight!"

She sighed, and added with real pathos—

"It's aging me, Philip—positively aging me."

"Nothing could do that, my dear lady. You must not take it seriously. The symptoms are common.

This is the first stage—the lover with the latest Gaiety photo on his mantelshelf and a woeful ballad, made by the *Sketch*, to his mistress's borrowed eyebrows. After that you get the soldier and the official spanking as approved by the War Office."

Lady Alcester shook her head. Before Philip she was natural, honest—the mother and the widow. Her airs and ridiculous graces were for others.

"I thought you would have helped me," she protested. "I was counting upon you."

"Countess," he said, "I will do anything in the world for you. Give me three days in London to find out how far this affair has gone, and I promise you that if it can be stopped, I will stop it."

"Ah, that's more like the old Philip. Go down to Cambridge for me, and see the boy for yourself. You cannot think how this wounds a mother's heart. The honour of our house is all to us, positively all we have."

"Except Quentin," he suggested naïvely.

She tapped him with her parasol, and said "Naughty boy!" Her further words of wisdom gave place presently to a little cry of pleasure, and she exclaimed, "Why, there's the General, I do believe. Go and tell him I'm waiting—tell him I'm very angry with him. What is the man thinking of?"

To be precise, the man was thinking how he could escape this ancient dowager, who was so ready to confer a mother's sympathy upon him. When he observed that he was detected, and that flight might be shameful, he crossed the grass and took a chair at her side a little ruefully.

"Splendid game," he said; "have you seen anything of it, Countess?"

"I was watching you," she said archly; and per-

ceiving that she had instantly become the coquette again, Philip wisely stole away. Certainly, her waist was ridiculously small.

Alice had taken up her place by the rails at this time, and quite a company of inane-looking men babbled and frisked with her. It was not lost upon Philip that she had learned to use her pretty eyes with killing effect; and that she flashed bewitching glances indiscriminately upon old and young, handsome and plain, wise and foolish. Nothing but the vanity which desires to please at any cost could provoke this uneclectic favour, he thought, and the idea was far from being welcome to him. Nor was he alone in his opinion; for while he stood at the rails watching her a sharp voice behind him cried—"Are you going to cut us, Mr. Rose?" and when he turned round he discovered the vitriolic Lady Anne at his elbow, and with her the Elsen girls, Carrie, Gwen, and Edna. They, too, were watching Alice with friendly regard, and they expressed their thoughts in their own charitable way.

"She's beginning well," said Lady Anne benignly. "I hope her husband won't come back from Scotland to spoil it."

"How good of him, isn't it, Mr. Rose?" asked Carrie Elsen.

"Yes, and he always sends her a telegram to say when he's coming home," chimed in Gwen, the younger sister. Edna, a pretty child, alone was silent. She really liked Alice.

"Well," said Philip, when he had heard them all, "I don't suppose you'd have a woman lock herself up in a nunnery because her husband is catching salmon. Why shouldn't she talk to the men? Don't you sometimes, Lady Anne?"

"I? Oh, my dear man, I'm a back number. When you can find me a man who is worth talking to, I will make myself notorious, as that woman is doing."

"Then you don't object to notoriety?"

The question was passed over. Lady Anne's eyes were glued upon the troop about Alice.

"She's after young Bobby Fenton now. Look at the way she laughs at him. And that outrageous gown! You can very easily see that she's never had more than forty pounds a year to dress upon. She nearly ruined her poor mother before this ironmonger married her. They used to call him 'Shovels' down in Sheffield. He'll want a big one if he's to pay her bills!"

"Perhaps he won't pay them," suggested Carrie Elsen amiably.

"I wish some one would come along in a motor-car and pay mine," said Gwen sweetly. Edna, the youngest, contented herself with the remark that if Quentin Caird were an "ironmonger," she'd like to keep his shop.

"So would a good many people," said Philip, turning to her with relief. "I should particularly like to be that kind of ironmonger myself. The business brings in a hundred thousand a year, I am told."

"She'll spend every penny of it!—or the men will spend it for her," said the Lady Anne irritably. "Some one ought to tell her husband what's going on. I call it disgraceful—in public, too, before all these people."

"If it were not in public and before all these people, it might be disgraceful," Philip suggested quietly; and then he asked them if they were going to her little dance on the following Wednesday. The tone of the conversation changed instantly.

"She gives jolly parties," Edna said, with sparkling eyes.

"And the men tumble over each other," cried Gwen.

"A pretty supper I ate at her last," protested Lady Anne—"half a cucumber and a glass of sweet champagne!"

"She's too busy to think of any one but herself," said Carrie.

"Then you won't go on Wednesday?" Philip put it to them, and with that parting shot he left them. Five minutes afterwards he was talking to Quentin Caird himself over a whiskey-and-soda in the clubhouse. The "fisherman" had returned from Scotland, disgusted by swollen rivers and wretched sport. He had hurried to Ranelagh after his wife, and the first person he met was Philip Rose, sauntering by himself upon the deserted lawn. The encounter was mutually welcome.

"My dear Rose, is this the lonely furrow? I should have thought that you knew half the women here."

"So I do, Caird—that's just why I don't want to know the other half. What are you doing out of Scotland?—and where are the fish?"

"In the river—the flies have ceased from troubling and the salmon are at rest. I have had a dusty drive in a hansom—let us go and kill the fatted calf."

"You'll find plenty over by the rails there—talking to Lady Alice."

"Ah, my wife is rather given to that kind of banquet—shall it be a whiskey-and-soda?"

"The eternal whiskey-and-soda—it will be written on our hearts when we die."

"Then they'll know what to give us in the other world. This seems a pleasant place, by the way. What do people do here?"

"A variety of things—they meet other people's husbands to begin with. Those who can't ride criticise the

polo. The youngest of the ladies expect the oldest of the men to pay their dinner bills. I call it arboreal flirtation."

"Suggesting monkeys. Alice likes it, though. It's all in the curriculum, she says, and you must be seen here."

"That's something, anyway—there are plenty of places frequented by smart women where the great thing is not to be seen. I am not suggesting for a moment that Alice frequents them. They tell me she is just that success socially I should have expected her to be."

He put it as a question, and Quentin took it up with an air of confidence foreign to him. He quite understood that his wife had known Philip Rose from her childhood, and he was not afraid to speak intimately to one who had long been intimate with the family.

"I don't quite know what you mean by success, Rose. She gives a great many parties and invites a great many people. I am told that we are to entertain Royalty before the season is over. The illustrated papers print her portrait, and speak of her as 'charming,' 'chic,' and 'popular.' She never has a minute to herself, and never goes to bed sober——"

"Good God! My dear Caird!"

"Wait a moment. I am not referring to alcoholic liquors. Alice's excitement is the drug we call vanity. She dines at home or at a restaurant, goes to the theatre or the opera, sups at the Carlton, sups again with Lady This or Mrs. That—comes home a bundle of chiffon and feathers, white with fatigue, too weary to talk, a mere wreck until she has breakfasted next day. This, I believe, is expected of 'smart women.' What is expected of their husbands I don't quite know."

"Oh, that's evident—they are expected to go fishing."

Quentin smiled a little hardly. His face was capable of expressing even a shadow of an emotion, and Philip thought that he now read a surprising bitterness and sense of disappointment upon it. But the even tone of the voice was unchanged when he continued—

"Oh, yes; that's conventional. But there may be men with an old-fashioned notion of motherhood and the home. In that case, you see, Scotland is merely a makeshift."

It was quite evident that he was speaking of deep matters; and Philip, always sympathetic, responded at once in the same vein.

"I should regard it as a question of influence—and I should not go to Scotland, Caird. Women nowadays sow their wild oats just as much as men—unfortunately they sow them after marriage, and it depends upon the man whether the crop falls upon good ground or bad. If a wife is fond of her husband, she cannot help being influenced by him. He is in fault if he does not bestow upon her those larger gifts of discretion and counsel which he naturally possesses. In Lady Alice's case, she is the victim of reaction. They were always very poor, as you know. She has been wanting things for years, and now, like the millionaire's child, she wants to want something. When she is quite accustomed to her new state, she will probably settle down in it. The toys are all new just now, and must be played with."

"I agree—though I am far from believing that money could spoil her. She has been very good to her brother at Cambridge—I think you coached him, did you not, when he made more or less a grand tour?"

"Yes, that was so. It was a *chef d'œuvre* in Paris to keep him out of the music-halls. I remember taking

him to the circus one night, and telling him that all *blasé* men went there. The thing was not a success—it was the night a Spanish woman, La Belle Esmeralda, fell from a trapeze and was killed."

He spoke of it indifferently, as though the particular event could not possibly be known to his companion; but chancing to look up at the moment, he observed that Quentin's face was deadly pale, and that he could hardly speak for excitement.

"You saw that, Rose—you saw the woman fall?" was the instant question.

Philip repeated that he had seen it perfectly.

"Why do you ask?" he went on; "did you know her?"

"She was my wife," said Quentin with great calmness. "I should not have told you if you had not seen her die. Alice knows, of course, and I need scarcely ask your secrecy. Come, let us go and see the polo. The game must be almost over."

They turned away together; and as they went Philip, greatly wondering, asked himself—

"What is he keeping from us?—what, in God's name, is behind it all?"

CHAPTER IX

SIR PERCIVAL

PHILIP thought that Alice displayed some little evidence of temper when Quentin appeared upon the scene. He set it down to a woman's natural aversion from surprises—not in the least to the desire that Quentin should not be there. It was amusing, however, to remark how quickly the company about her dispersed upon the arrival of so relatively an unimportant personage as a husband. No longer were there quick glances from flashing eyes, pretty taps upon the arm, or those "smart" asides which attend an amusing flirtation. Alice became matter-of-fact in a moment.

"You never told me that you were coming," she said, with a note of displeasure in her voice.

Quentin answered her that in future he would be more careful.

"How could I tell you when I did not know myself? I am accustomed to do things at five minutes' notice—even to come home, Alice."

She softened in a moment.

"Of course, dearest, I am very glad. What I meant was that I should not have been here if I had known. Mama's somewhere about—we were all going to dine together. Won't you stop for that now?"

"Certainly I will; that's why I came down. We'll dine and drive up in the motor if it's a fine night. I suppose you have room for Mr. Rose?"

"There is always room for him," she said, and she threw to Philip one of those quick glances which a woman gives to a man who has loved her.

The dinner was scarcely a success. Quentin listened with some impatience to old Lady Alcester's stories of the dead Earl, who once made a speech in the House of Lords and was horribly castigated by the Radical newspapers. She herself was not at all pleased at the sudden advent of her son-in-law, and she implored Philip in a whisper to say nothing of Percival and the "affair." "It lets us down so," she said—and went on to proclaim her son's virtues in a loud voice, and to ask General Oscar if the Seventh Hussars were not very lucky to get him. Quentin himself mildly suggested that Percy's undoubted gifts for doing nothing and doing it well might secure him a berth in Pall Mall. This damped the merriment of the occasion; and when old General Oscar suddenly remembered (precisely as his cigar was finished) that he had an appointment in London, and Philip determined to return to town by train, both Alice and her mother set down the collapse of their plans to Quentin's eccentricity. His capacity for enjoyment was evidently limited. He could not enter into these trivial frivolities which figure so largely in the sum of a woman's day. His recreation lay among his books. Country life, sport of all kinds, were indispensable to him. And yet, had they known it, he was secretly proud of his wife's success. He wished her to be a social leader, and remained unaware of the price which must be paid for that distinction.

Philip Rose had a shrewd idea of the situation when

he quitted Ranelagh that night; and a visit to Cambridge three days later confirmed his view. A few discreet inquiries in town were sufficient to equip him for his encounter with Master Percival. Daisy Thane he discovered to be a pretty and harmless girl, waiting for any number of Prince Charmings, and quite indifferent to anything else but the state of their banking accounts. The Earl of Alcester she regarded as a gem of some price; but she was perfectly well aware of the impoverished state of his exchequer, and she spoke of him openly as "glove money." These facts made Philip positively cheerful when he arrived in the familiar streets of the University town. He fully realised his responsibility, and the necessity of keeping the family name without stain. Quentin, last of all, must be asked to share such a scandal as this.

Twelve o'clock had been struck by the bells of Great St. Mary's when Philip arrived in the New Court of Trinity. Accustomed to dispense with all formality, and armed still with a certain *auctoritas magistri*, he entered the Earl's rooms without ceremony, and was amused to see an untasted breakfast, together with one copy of the *Sportsman* and the last number of the *Car*, spread out upon the table. Quite aware that the proprietor of these delights was still at his toilet, Philip knocked at the bedroom door, and was immediately answered by a faint voice, which said "Halloa!"

"It's I—don't you know me?"

"No, I don't; who are you?"

"Philip, you ass, Percy."

"What, old Socrates! Come in, old chap; I thought you were a dun."

Philip entered the bedroom without further ceremony, and nearly fell over the sponge bath, placed conveniently

near the door. Percival himself, in an amazing suit of pyjamas, lay outside the bed, reading a French novel. The ornaments of the room were few—deal furniture of the baldest kind, a silver toilette set, and one photograph of Daisy Thane hung for an eikon above the mantel-shelf. The book proved to be the latest volume of "Gyp." Percival flung it across the room and shook hands heartily with Philip.

"My dear chap—how good of you!"

"Not at all—it seems like old times to be here."

"We'll have a day, Philip. What do you say to a brandy-and-champagne to begin with?"

"Is that your usual stirrup cup?"

"There's nothing to beat it. Just a dash of brandy in one glass of fizz and a man is ready to face the world."

"It would be rather a red face, don't you think?"

"Oh, I never think. The man who thinks is lost. They call me Sir Percival up here—the fellow in Tennyson's what-do-you-call-it?"

"Tennyson's *Referee*, eh!—is that what you are thinking of?"

"You always were a rotter, Philip. Go in and read the *Sportsman* while I splash. If you want serious reading, you'll find the 'Contes Drolatiques' on my shelf."

"Are they set for the General?"

"What a good idea—I'll tell the Dean. If you're hungry, eat my breakfast. A piece of toast always sees me through. Sha'n't be long, old chap."

He sprang up with a youth's buoyancy, and presently Philip could hear him hissing and splashing in his bath. The sitting-room was furnished with considerable, if effeminate taste. A bank of flowers hid the grate. A

fine buffet of old Chippendale took the place of the customary Cambridge cupboard. The armchairs were covered in scarlet rep and were monstrously deep. You could scarcely see the walls between photographs of Gaiety beauties. A pictorial history of musical comedy, Philip said. The influence of Cambridge on this tender plant was unmistakable. Here was one of those for whom the Church prayed in her Litany that he might be endowed with grace, wisdom, and understanding. Unquestionably Percival had need of such endowments.

The Earl was very lively when he entered the room and cast a critical, if unsatisfied, eye upon the breakfast table. He wore a suit of grey flannels and the colours of the 'Varsity golf club. His manner was a combination of the old and the new. By inheritance a gentleman, he retained a certain dignity when he chose. To this he added, when he did not choose, those phrases and ideas which he abstracted every Saturday from a paper, pink in colour and vague in its moral tone.

"What, not eating, Philip? Then where does virtue come in? At your time of life you ought to be up to breakfasts."

"Then I should rise at twelve precisely, it appears."

Percival laughed, and did his best to worry a slice of toast. Of tea he drank prodigiously. He had dined with young Morton of the Hall, he explained, and the champagne was not good.

"I think that Morton gets it from his money-lender. Fifty in cash and a case of 'Old Landed' for a hundred bill. It tastes of metal——"

"Coming from a money-lender, it naturally would. I suppose we all drank it in our time—and the soda water next morning."

"I don't believe in soda—the brandy cure is the best, especially if you're going to golf afterwards."

"That's what you are going to do this afternoon, I suppose?"

"Yes, I'm in for the spring handicap. You see, no one does anything in the May. I keep all my serious reading for the 'long.' Alice will tell you that I read half Shakespeare last vac. It's perfectly wonderful to think that any chap wrote so much. I shall take up astronomy next time. Good idea, eh, to get the girls to look through your telescope?"

"Excellent," said Philip. "Will you ask Miss Daisy Thane to be one of them?"

Sir Percival giggled in far from knightly fashion.

"Oh, come, I say, who's been giving Daisy away?"

"Isn't her father the proper one to do that?"

"Father—she hasn't got a father. Her mother's real, though some of them are hired."

"My dear fellow, what an extraordinary statement."

"Yes, all these American girls who come over in the chorus hire mothers. It looks better, and they can make good terms with the men who propose to them. It's a case of business management."

Philip stared in blank incredulity.

"But, my dear Percy, I thought this was your particular weakness."

Sir Percival again obliged with his expressive and far from pleasant smile.

"That's mother, I suppose. Just as if you can't sup with a girl without wanting to marry her. I'll tell you what, though—Daisy's more of a lady than half the women in our set. And she's twice as clever as any of them."

"You are evidently not a believer in the women of the period, Percy?"

"No, I'm not, and that's a fact. Just you go to the Carlton to dinner any night, and see how many of them are dining with their own husbands. It's all right to be the other fellow, if you're blackguard enough; but when I marry I want a wife, and not the quarter of one."

"Excellent principles; but they are coupling your name and Miss Daisy's, all the same. I heard it from two or three people in town."

"You can always hear a lie from two or three people in town. Try one of these weeds, and I'll tell you all about it. They're not paid for—I hope your moral principles won't suffer."

"They are going to end in smoke, it appears. You don't seem to have made much of a breakfast, by the way?"

"I'm never fit until I've had a round of golf—the night's the time to live, in my opinion. When you're in love, ask yourself how the girl looks in a dressing-gown when she's having her morning tea. It's as good as a douche, anyway."

"Do you think that Miss Daisy might survive such an effort of the imagination?"

"She might have done before I saw her with the black man."

"Ho, ho! a rival—a Rajah, without doubt, and shining withal."

The reminiscence was a little painful to Sir Percival. He lit a cigarette and fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair.

"I was gone, and that's a fact. If it hadn't been for the blackie, I should have proposed to her, Philip. You may say I was a fool, but so are most men when they

are in love. She's a jolly little girl, and she makes me laugh. Well, I went up to town with Fennimore last week, and meant to take her and the real mother to supper. She wouldn't come, so Fenny and I asked his old pal Gracie Wynne—she hasn't gone in for a mother yet—and went off to the Carlton. First person that we saw was Daisy and the Rajah of Melanpore. You could have knocked me down with a champagne cork. And she was wearing my watch-brooch, too, for that beast to admire."

"She didn't return it, I suppose?"

"Now, would she? But I'm not sorry, really. A fellow is wise to look about a bit before he takes a step like that."

"On a particularly slippery staircase. I congratulate you, my dear boy. The Rajah's inheritance is scarcely to be coveted. Black but comely, you know. This is the best news I have heard for a month. Lady Alcester will cry for joy."

"Yes, mother's rather good at crying for joy. Tell her that the worst has passed, and that if she can raise me five hundred my filial instincts will respond gladsomely. Of course, you'll stop the night, Philip. You mean to dine with me?"

"Well, I think I can manage that. You have a guest-table in hall, haven't you?"

"Oh, guest-table be hanged! We'll invite Fenny and Roper and young Hales to make a night of it. Don't you worry about my extravagance. Quentin has promised Alice to see me through. He's a good chap, and his money is just so many figures in a bank-book. If I were he, I would start racing to-morrow."

"The figures would soon be less if he did so."

"Not if he went the right way about it. Hales and I

bought a colt last year and entered him for all the classics. We ought to have made a pile."

"And didn't you?"

"No, when we sent the brute up to Radley at Newmarket he said his mule could gallop faster. That's the way with colts. They're just like women; you never know what they can do until you try to break them."

"And sometimes they break you. Well, it's the inevitable, Percy; and, all said and done, there is no compulsion to marry them."

"Just what I think—never write anything and you're safe. Let's go out and see the town. We'll lunch with Hales and do the river afterwards."

Philip went willingly, though he was entirely unaware of the momentous tidings he was about to hear from Sir Percival's lips.

The worthy Hales, it seemed to Philip, was scarcely well treated by this generous offer to lunch with him uninvited; but they found him obliging and even pressing, and when a typical Cambridge lunch was eaten, all three strolled down to the river to have a look at the boats. A sense of pleasure accompanied Philip through the familiar streets which he had trodden aforetime with such lofty ambitions and resolute purpose. How sunny his own undergraduate days had been! What prospects dazzled him when he took a first in the classical tripos and believed that any career he cared to choose was open to him. And now what was he? A superior order of pedagogue owing his obscurity to those personal beliefs and doubts which would not bend the knee to orthodoxy. Such was his superficial excuse. The moments were rare when he admitted to himself that a hopeless passion for a woman who was now another man's wife had contributed the chief factor

in the sum of his failure. He had not married the Lady Alice because he was poor—he remained poor because he had not married her. Even his friendship for her might be a danger to them both. A strong man, he feared to trust himself wholly where Alice was concerned; and if he believed by a premonition which was entirely illogical that she would one day have need of him, he dismissed the warning as idle, and determined henceforth to see as little of her as might be decently possible. It was characteristic of his indecision, however, that the first subject discussed by Percival and himself, so soon as they were upon the river's bank, was Quentin's wife, her present and her future.

"It's my opinion," said the Earl, "that Alice is making the pace just a bit too hot. She's here, there, and everywhere, like a filly let loose in a field—and what her dresses must cost, Quentin and Paquin only know. I always said that she had a fine talent for spending money—she's displaying it every day. Quentin's a generous old chap, but their tastes are as wide apart as the poles. I shouldn't care to be in her shoes if she gets his back up. And she will unless she puts the brake on. I told her so last time I met her and she flew in a fearful rage. Women never like to hear the truth, even when it's pleasant."

"Oh, come, don't be too sweeping. You mean to say that Alice, having been poor all her life, is settling down to the spending of a big income rather slowly. Well, who wouldn't. Suppose you came into a fortune tomorrow, what would you do with it? Retire to the practice of Adam Smith?—I don't think so. You'd have a racing stable in a month—and be a splendid bankrupt in three years. It's in your blood, Percy. You come of a long line of spendthrifts, and debt is

rocked in the cradles of your house. If Alice travels at express speed, it seems to me that she is keeping on the rails with it all. That is something in these days, when our virtues are all the privacy that is left to us."

Percival seemed far from convinced. He did not realise his sister's position even yet, or the rights she had won by her marriage with Quentin.

"I shall never be rich," he exclaimed reflectively, "unless old Quentin pays me a big salary for the sake of my race——"

"What race?—a horse race?"

"No, I mean for the good of the family, and that kind of thing. I don't see why he shouldn't. It's a big thing for a man like that to marry into a family like ours. He ought to see that we keep up all the old places; he can always claim me as his brother-in-law."

Philip laughed outright for the first time that day.

"My dear Percy, that's worth ten thousand a year to him, now isn't it? But I don't believe you are serious."

"I wouldn't be, Philip. I left all that behind me when we wound up the grand tour. What a beggar you were for æsthetics. Do you remember the hours we spent in the picture galleries? How I used to curse the name of Velasquez and Murillo and Botticelli and the whole crowd! And you wouldn't even let me go to a music-hall in Paris! You put me off with a circus and we saw that Spanish woman fall. I dream about that sometimes. What a picture she was and how still she lay after she fell."

"What makes you think of her to-day, Percy?"

"Oh, I don't know. Talking of Paris, perhaps. There's another reason. I met a young American—one of the Harvard scholars—in Fennimore's rooms last

night, and he was in Paris when we were. He says the woman was not killed."

"Good God! How did he know?"

"Oh, he had the run of the place—used to go behind, you know, with bouquets. He saw the Spanish girl three weeks after the accident. She had been badly hurt, but she was as lively as ever. That's his tale, anyway."

"It must have been a tale. You don't forget that there was quite a colony of Spaniards at the circus just then. He saw one of the others. Obviously, it would be the wish of the management to hush the thing up. The story is preposterous—just a big lie."

"Philip, Philip; but, man, what's it to do with you?"

Philip stood quite still upon the river bank. He did not answer the question; he did not see the shimmer of colour, the swiftly moving boats, the panorama of tree and grass and water. His thoughts were flashed instantly to London, to the house of the woman he had loved. For if this story were true, he said, Alice was not Quentin's wife.

"Come," he continued to Percival, "it is nonsense, of course. Some day I will tell you what interest I have in asking you; and, my dear Percy, I really think I must return to-night."

The Earl took his arm fiercely—

"It's my turn to swear," said he, "and I'm hanged if you do."

CHAPTER X

A WOMAN'S LETTERS

AT twelve o'clock upon the day after Philip's visit to Cambridge, the Lady Alice opened her letters in the little boudoir of her house in Berkeley Square. She had been very late overnight, and she sipped her tea frequently as she turned over the pile of correspondence before her and wondered if it really were worth reading. A beautiful morning wrapper disguised a general negligence of attire—her feet were enveloped in little fur slippers and her hair was undressed. It was no unreal tribute to her beauty that Quentin had just paid her when he said that she was charming. Many years must pass before she would need a "clever" maid or depend upon foreign markets for her powder to win the homage of men or the spite of women.

"You are just a picture, Alice," Quentin said, as he kissed her—he was motoring to Sunningdale to golf—"you should wear that gown at Buckingham Palace tonight."

"My dear boy, what would the Lord Chamberlain say?"

"Something pretty, no doubt. He must be just as sick as the rest of us of the manufactured article."

"Women must make the best of themselves, dear.

Why shouldn't they? You would if you were a woman."

"Oh, I dare say; though I should feel an irresistible temptation to give my wig to the caddie when I drove off the tee."

"A wise man does not know that such things as wigs exist. Will you dine at the club, Quentin? You know I shall be very late to-night."

"Again, Alice?"

"It can't be helped. I dine with the Erringtons—you know you said you wouldn't come. Then Bobby Fenton's people are at home after the Court, and I have promised to go on."

"Go by all means. It seems to me that the only time when your friends really are at home is about three in the morning. You'll wear yourself out, if you don't take care, Alice. You must have nerves of iron."

"Perhaps they are. A woman can stand a lot of that sort of thing. You won't be cross with me, Quentin?"

"How could any one be cross with Alice? I am pleased to think that you enjoy it. When you are a little bored, you can come to me, and I will teach you how to rest."

She laughed brightly, and lifted her face to be kissed.

"We'll go away again for a whole month when this is over, Quentin. It will be quite a second honeymoon. You want me to be a success, dear, don't you? I know you do, or I should hate it all. I must be getting on, or the women would not be so spiteful; even Dicky puts nasty postscripts to her letters now."

"That decides it, Alice. Well, I shall expect you when I see you. I'm on that Committee of the Naval

League at five, so I shall dine with Andrew Black afterwards. He is immense—the very best firebrand I have ever met, and one of the most learned. He'll keep me awake until you come in."

"I don't like your sitting up, dear. I wish you wouldn't."

"Oh," he said, very tenderly, "I couldn't sleep until I had you safe by my side."

Alice was a little thoughtful when he had gone out. The "whirl," as Dicky called it, that swift current of trivial events upon which she was carried so bravely, left her these odd moments of reflection, in which she asked herself if she were doing her duty to Quentin, and how far woman's success socially must mean the loosening of other bonds. Undoubtedly the two were drifting apart. She did not love any other man; there were hours when her affection was ardent and omnipotent—but in the main their lives were lived in different worlds; Quentin's in that of such fads, artistic and political, as amused a man of leisure—hers in the little world of Mayfair, for whose chief seats she had sighed since her childhood. If realisation lagged far behind anticipation, at least the excitement was as yet undiminished; and the almost magic change from aristocratic poverty to an abundance of riches could not fail to cast a spell upon her. Two years ago the purchase of even a mean gown was the subject of much talk and wise discrimination. Now dressmakers waited patiently through long hours for a single word with her; great jewellers beamed upon her slavishly; her patronage was bought and sold as any valuable asset which is marketable. In every social list you would find her name written prominently. Thousands envied her; she had won all—a good man's love had thus endowed her.

Impossible, it might have been said, that her own gratitude and affection should be questioned when these were all the reward she could offer him.

Her penitential moods were usually of the briefest. Upon this particular morning she had much to distract her attention—the Court dress first of all, and after that her letters. The dress undoubtedly was superb—three photographers had already applied for permission to photograph it; while young women from the offices of ladies' newspapers bribed the maid for a first account of it. Alice knew that the gown would do her justice, and when she had looked at herself in every possible glass, she sat down to her letters and her toilet. Her maid, the stately Albertine, who had lived the best part of her life in Paris, knew when to speak and when to hold her tongue. Alice read her letters one by one, and dropped them idly at her feet.

The first was from Lady Anne. "Don't forget," it said, "that I am counting upon a seat in your brougham to-night."

"The old cat!" was the comment; "as if she ever wrote to any one unless she wanted something."

The next letter was from Dicky.

"I hear that Philip Rose is in town, and I have told the Fentons to ask him. Just say 'thanks,' please; and mind you take me to Ranelagh next Saturday."

Alice put the letter down, and the maid observed the sudden shadow upon her face.

"Madame has bad news?" she asked.

"Not at all, Albertine."

"Then Madame is not very well to-day."

"I am perfectly well, Albertine; go on with your work."

The maid determined to read that particular letter

upon the first opportunity. Her mistress, meanwhile, asked herself why Dicky should imagine that a meeting with Philip Rose would give her pleasure. Had this man, so grave, so plain-spoken, any real influence over her? She would have scouted the notion that she loved him, and yet there was a vague, an indefinable bias towards him she could not in a way account for. Her wiser instinct said, "You must see little of Philip Rose." Her pride said, "Nonsense! Am I a child, and is not my love for Quentin all to me?" She had dismissed it an instant later, and was reading a letter from Quentin's sister, Prudence, an old-fashioned north-countrywoman, who knew little of London and less of its social world.

"You must be settling down in your little home now, my dear," the letter ran. "I know what it means to get into a house, and I can sympathise with you. If there is anything you wish me to do, please let me know. Quentin wants a deal of coddling, but you won't mind that. I used to go through his clothes every Saturday, and I speak from experience. He likes to get to bed at eleven—you must humour him if he is particular in little things. Every man thinks he is an angel, and its wiser not to interfere with his celestial ideas. I don't know how you get on with your household accounts, but if an old spinster may say a word, it is this—keep your eye on the ounces and the pounds will take care of themselves."

There were five pages of this sort of thing, and Alice was too young not to laugh at it. The "little home" amused her very much. She determined to invite Prudence up to town—vanity dictated the desire—and when she had put the letter aside to be answered, and had torn up a score of bills, circulars, begging letters, and parsons' appeals, the gong sounded for lunch, and

she went down to find old Lady Anne and two of the Elsen girls in her boudoir.

"I came to see that you meant to take me to-night," the old lady said sweetly. "I don't want any men in my place."

But Carrie Elsen said—

"We've just seen Mr. Rose in the Park, and he wouldn't come on. Isn't he brutal, dear?"

Alice answered with a shadow of annoyance.

"Mr. Rose only comes when he is invited."

She spent the afternoon in her electric brougham, calling upon people whom she did not wish to see; and afterwards, when she sat out on the lawn in the Park, seeing people upon whom she certainly did not wish to call. Philip Rose was there, driving in a victoria which that "monk," the gentle Father Dominic (who had embarked upon that hopeless task of converting the West End), had borrowed from an elderly and ailing member of his flock. A little to Alice's annoyance, Philip did not approach her as he used to do; and she thought that his greeting was a little formal. Why it should be so she did not know; but the truth was evident, and it piqued her. When she returned to Berkeley Square it was quite time to dress; and in the excitement of that and of the dinner at the Erringtons', she quickly forgot her resentment and even the existence of such a person as Philip Rose. For that matter, a young Cabinet Minister, who owed his career in life to unremitting attendance upon a great dame's tea-table, was quite amusing in his way; and his story of a recent episode at the Carlton made her laugh immoderately.

"You know old General Oscar?—yes, of course you do. His reputation in the army rests entirely on his

gift of tongues. He uses the worst language in the service. Well, he was asked to dinner at the Carlton the other night by the Danganfelds—pretty daughter and that sort of thing. Oscar was in grand form—quite poetical, I am told; he got as far as the "paint the lily stage," and old Danganfeld looked serious. When they came away, Oscar went in a four-wheeler—his nerves won't stand hansoms; but the Danganfelds had their motor. It was a bad night, and the car skidded at the bottom of St. James's Street—they shot all across the road, and knocked over a four-wheeler crawling out of the square. Oscar was in it, of course; but he didn't recognise them. They say that a shaggy head emerged slowly from the overturned cab, and that the gift of tongues began. He called old Danganfeld more names than are to be found in the 'Britannica.' Elsie, the girl, he advised to return to the ballet, from which she appeared to have come. They let him go on for a bit, and then ventured to declare their identity. Would you believe it?—he swore worse than ever when he knew who they were."

Alice promised to tell Lady Anne the story without loss of time, and the politician went on to speak of "bridge" in such a deep manner that his capacity for public life was demonstrated beyond dispute. For one thing she liked him—his happiness did not appear to depend upon vulgar stories of others' misfortunes or weaknesses. He just talked like an over-grown schoolboy, and showed that healthy appetite for frivolity which is the chief endowment conferred upon our younger men by public schools and universities. When the dinner was over, a short hour in the drawing-room passed quickly enough, and Alice drove away to Buckingham Palace in that mood of exhilarating con-

"It was well for her that she did not know."

tent which is the surest fruit of enjoyment. The crush and splendour of the Court were greatly to her liking. To shine here amongst the most beautiful women in the social world of the day stood for her as the final achievement of the social career. And she knew that she did shine. The mirrors showed her a childish face wreathed about with pretty hair, a skin as soft as satin, an exquisite neck roped about with diamonds, a gown which had no rival at the Palace. One of the earliest compliments paid to her was by an ambassador, who told her that she had the finest eyes that he had ever seen look out at him from a woman's face. "But they are very wicked eyes," he said ; and at that she tapped him with her fan. Nor was this the only compliment paid to her during that long night. The men flocked about her everywhere, compelling her to exert her wit until she almost lost her voice. The women smiled so sweetly that she knew they hated her. The whole scene was one of brilliant talk and sparkling gems and flashing eyes and many lights. Music added to the intoxication of it; and when Alice returned to Berkeley Square at three o'clock in the morning, she was so utterly fagged out that she climbed the staircase with difficulty and sank into a chair with that sigh of content which speaks of utter exhaustion.

Quentin had fallen into a heavy sleep about an hour before her return. Her light footsteps did not awake him. She stooped tenderly, and kissed his face, which a strong arm pillowed. "Of what was he dreaming?" she asked herself.

It was well for her that she did not know.

For Quentin dreamed that Isabella Montanes lived, and that he stood upon the brink of tragedy.

CHAPTER XI

LADY LEVERTON'S MAID

QUENTIN had been tolerant of Alice's season, because he believed that when the excitement of it had passed away the autumn and winter would bring her to a closer intimacy with him than London and her circle permitted. At least, he said, he would have her to himself during the months of August and September; and such weeks as they passed at Homburg would be a fair compromise for the quiet month she was to spend with him at his bungalow in Sussex. If his subsequent disappointment were the greater by reason of these hopes, he did not confess it to her. The autumn of the year found him undeceived. He began to say then that marriage had nothing to give him. His wife loved him, but had no leisure to tell him so. When fashion did not claim her, then her relatives were at once in evidence.

Their month in Sussex! What a picnic it was to have been. Ah, he had forgotten Lady Alcester's existence. She came uninvited with three lap dogs, a curate, and her eldest daughter. His own sister, Prudence, was invited to Sussex, because "it really did not matter who was there." Quentin was very patient; but "Sir Percival," the Earl, provoked him to the last

point. "Percival should go into the Church," he told Alice one day; "he would establish a record in collections." She resented his humour, and for the first time since they were married the two did not speak at dinner.

This little rift spread apace. The Erringtons had a party at Bad Nauheim later on, and they pressed Alice to join it. Quentin gave her leave reluctantly. She did not really wish to go; but his temper made her obstinate, and she persisted.

"But you have not got heart disease, Alice," he said; "why Bad Nauheim?"

"Oh, every one has got heart disease in our set," she answered lightly; "of course, if you don't wish me to enjoy myself——"

"I wish it above everything in the world. Go, by all means. I trust they will effect a cure."

She accepted his reluctant consent, and took him at his word. Possibly a sense of virtue prompted her to take liberties with his generosity. She had been true to him even in thought since their marriage—she knew that she loved him; and so, by a woman's argument, she reasoned that she had every right to enjoy herself. At Bad Nauheim, at Homburg, she repeated the success she had won in town. Men would have admitted that there were plenty of prettier women—but there was none, they said, with more vivacity or charm. In the classical English of the Earl, her brother, "Alice was always on her fourth speed." The dullard sharpened at her presence; wise men confided in her; fools believed that she was in love with them, and women scandalised her. She went everywhere like some wonderful butterfly, unable to rest, but showing a dazzling radiance of colour. Her social victories were rapidly becoming life

to her. They destroyed her capacity for enjoying those domestic "retreats" which were to have been Quentin's reward.

She returned to London at the end of September and spent precisely ten days with Quentin at the bungalow. Perhaps she was a little ashamed of her frivolity, for she settled down seriously to golf; and although it bored her inexpressibly, she simulated a graceful enthusiasm. This lasted with the dull days; but directly she discovered that the sun was ruining her colour she abandoned golf as an unsuitable game for women, and reminded Quentin of the great house-party to be given at Westerham Castle by the Marchioness of that name.

"We ought to be seen there, dear; we really ought," she said.

He asked her what special advantage would result from such a concession to the world. She was at no loss whatever for a reason.

"Oh, every one would be glad to go. It's *the* party of the month. And I want to score off the Erringtons, who are not asked."

"But you've been enjoying their hospitality for a month!"

"Oh, I mean to score in a friendly way. They say the Duke's going; if you had your own way, Quentin, I believe you'd shut me up in a monastery."

"With the Duke? No, I'm not quite so unselfish as that."

"You silly old dear. Did you ever really enjoy yourself in your life?"

"Tell me what is going to be done at Westerham Castle, and I will answer you if I can enjoy myself there."

"Well, they'll shoot, of course."

"Not in October—the leaves aren't down. They'll get a few birds outside, but it's poor sport."

"Then we shall bridge and motor."

"To let that old woman cheat you, and to drive with that madcap Westerham."

"Quentin, why are you such a brute?"

"Man is an animal—probably carnivorous."

"Oh, yes, every woman knows that when her *chef* won't stay."

But they went to Westerham all the same, and the "old woman" in question certainly did win three hundred pounds of Alice at bridge. The remaining weeks of the month were spent quietly at Knowl Manor—and to this superb seat came Alice's guests in the second week of November.

It was her first house-party since their marriage, and naturally she was very anxious about it. The list of guests had been drawn up as carefully as the menu for a good dinner. Few of the oldest friends were included among the chosen; but old Lady Anne was asked for terror of her tongue, and Lady Dicky and the Lady Bill to amuse the nimbler flirts. Quentin suggested his sister Prudence; but Alice was so very sure that the "dear thing" would be bored that he abandoned the proposal and left the matter entirely to her judgment. Mr. Danby, the young Cabinet Minister she had met at the Erringtons', was among the earliest asked. Her mother insisted upon General Oscar being included, and he accepted with indecent haste. Lord and Lady Westerham gave tone and bulk; the Bishop of Winchelsea, Dr. Polach, could come for the mid week, and so leave Sunday to the "bridgers"; Colonel Dene was there as a crack shot; Bobby Fenton came to make a

noise ; Sir Percival brought three Cambridge boys and a subaltern or two. For the latter, Alice sent an invitation to the Elsen girls. "What is a house-party without a flirtation?" she asked. Echo—not Quentin—answered, What?

These guests began to arrive at Knowl Station on the afternoon of the second Monday in November. Alice defied convention in refusing to begin at the week-end ; and as her "patrons" (Quentin insisted upon calling them that) came from other house-parties, were gathered, in fact, from the choicest and most widely separated bushes, the motors and the broughams were racing all day from the Manor to the railway, and the villagers declared that the oldest of them had not seen such a spectacle. Early to arrive was old General Oscar, who always travelled with a thermometer and fifteen pairs of boots. Lady Dicky and Lady Bill arrived with Percy and the subalterns—the station-master remarked that he liked to see young people "enjoying of themselves," having "dairters" of his own. The Lady Anne, armed with nine trunks and a maid, descended from her reserved carriage like a general of forces. The bishop alone travelled third class. He was exceedingly annoyed when he found that all the carriages had left, and that he must go to the house in a motor-car.

"Most dangerous—positively undignified ! I cannot understand what Mr. Quentin means by it. Does he wish to see me in a police-court?"

"I'll be your bail, Bishop," said Percival ; and he drove the Church at twenty-five miles an hour, regardless of the shovel-hat which his lordship was perforce compelled to hold between his knees. For the rest, the unfortunate maids and valets struggling with vast piles

of unsorted luggage, no one thought very much of them—and some of them had scarcely broken bread since dawn. They went on to the house as best they could, some in the fourgons, some in the village cabs, some on foot. Among the latter was an apparent Frenchwoman, who gave her name as Louise, and said that she was maid to Lady Leverton, the young American wife of a British Ambassador who was in England for a holiday. Veiled closely, the stranger seemed desirous of avoiding the other servants; and when they pointed out to her that it would be some time before the carriages returned, she set off willingly on foot. No one at the station, in fact, could quite understand her; though once, when addressing the porter, she used English with some fluency.

She was not a very tall woman, but the whiteness of her skin and the almost uncanny brightness of her eyes could be plainly perceived even through her veil. A close observer might have remarked that she used her left hand with some hesitation; and, indeed, her whole attitude was furtive and uneasy. As soon as possible she escaped the purlieus of the station, and walking in the shadow of the hedge, she pursued her lonely way irresolutely as one uncertain of the step she was taking. When the lane carried her up to the high ground, and she could see the Manor itself and the lake gleaming before its door, and beyond it the Lickey Hills standing up as picturesque sentinels of a spacious valley, she rested for many minutes together, and appeared to be on the very point of retracing her steps when the sound of a horse at a canter arrested her, and she raised herself upon tiptoe to see the rider.

Another, perhaps, would not have recognised Quentin readily, in his pink coat and smart white breeches; but

this woman named him at once in the group of three which returned from a long and disappointing day with the North Shropshire Hounds. He had changed, she thought; but she doubted if it were for the better. His clean-shaven face seemed a little thinner; his shoulders were less square, his chest had fallen in somewhat since the old days in America—none the less, the man remained to fascinate her anew, and send her more resolutely toward the Manor House. She walked now with firm step and unalterable purpose. Sooner or later Quentin Caird must meet her face to face. A woman's whim would choose the date.

It was just dusk when "Louise" arrived at the Manor, and presented herself somewhat timidly in the servants' hall. She met there a distracting reception—maids and valets were bustling, hither, thither, some carrying hot-water cans, some boots, others in the vain quest of mistresses and rooms. A kindly upper housemaid informed the stranger that Mrs. Rously, the housekeeper, would be down presently with the "list," and when this amiable old lady appeared, something like order emanated from the clattering chaos. "Louise" was informed that she was to sleep in a small room exactly opposite her mistress's. "Its nice and quiet, though I do say it's small," Mrs. Rously explained as she directed one of the under housemaids to show the way. "Louise" thanked her quietly, and carried her own luggage to the bedroom, which entirely justified the amiable lady's account of it. Small it was, and sparsely furnished—a cupboard, perchance, before the house was remodelled by Quentin's father; but any rat-hole is good enough for a maid, and this particular maid was very glad to be alone. Quietly and methodically she unpacked her clothes, and laid them out in the tiny

drawers of the deal chest. The view from her window showed her the great porch of the house and the sweeping drive before it. How different was the welcome accorded to the guests now arriving in the motors whose dazzling acetylene lamps cast their withering beams upon wall and plaster, and showed the white road as a ribbon of silver. What laughter, what a babel of tongues awaited them. How the tea-cups were rattling downstairs! Here in this bedroom, by the light of a single shabby candle, "Louise" searched the glass and beheld the face and the figure of a splendid woman. There, yonder, at the foot of the grand staircase, the Lady Alice was flashing her pretty eyes upon all indifferently. And the claim of both upon the Master of the house was the same—the claim of the wife who has the supreme title to his love and fidelity.

A shadow, almost sardonic, crossed the face of the waiting woman as she dressed herself in a trim black gown and put a white cap on becomingly.

"I must not be seen—not yet," she repeated to herself, and, the thought pleasing her, she extinguished the candle, and stood listening at the door of the room.

And so she saw Quentin again after many years as he strode along the corridor toward his bedroom.

CHAPTER XII

A FIGURE IN THE CORRIDOR

PHILIP ROSE arrived at Knowl to lunch one day quite unexpectedly. He said that he happened to be in the neighbourhood—but as the wise, if ancient, Lady Anne remarked, some men are always in the neighbourhood of pretty married women. As a matter of fact, Philip had been called to Birmingham, to see the father of a youth who was to be "finished" for Cambridge during the following year, and knowing of the house-party he could not resist the temptation to run over for an hour. Alice was frankly delighted to see him. Quentin urged him to stay.

"I am weary of all these fools," he said, with obvious sincerity. "If I were in the Bankruptcy Court to-morrow, there is not one of them would lend me a five-pound note. They talk the same nonsense all day, and play the same children's games every night. I don't profess to be a moral man, Philip; but some of these people are not fit to run a dive in Broadway. They cheat each other at the card-table; there is more dishonest scandal talked every night in this house than in any place in Shropshire. And we are 'correct,' mind you; we are maintaining our position, if you please!"

Philip understood the mood and was very tolerant of it.

"Let Alice have her way—it's new to her," he pleaded. "A clever woman soon settles down. After all there are only two or three of these brawls every year. Take her to the South of France after Christmas, and show her the sun."

"She would not see it, my dear fellow. She would be looking after the women's dresses. I give you my word—this, my father's house, is becoming intolerable to me. They scandalise each other beyond endurance. Imagine this—at dinner last night we agreed that old Lord Horton, the Secretary for Malta, is a thief, a rogue, a blackmailer, a liar, a hypocrite, a woman's toady, and a felon. No one is safe. There is not a man, even on the bench of bishops, to whom they leave a rag of reputation. Drink, morphia, vice—ask what you please, and they will give it to one or other of them. I tumble over them on the stairs, billing and cooing like housemaids. They win money from young girls, and are as greedy as continental blacklegs to be paid. Just a house-party, of course—and the thing it is necessary to do."

Philip asked a very practical question:

"When do you get rid of 'em?" he put it.

Quentin sighed impatiently.

"There's another lot to come when these are done with. We are to have a series, if you please—and after that we visit. I am determined to go back to Sussex. The old housekeeper is all the servant I want. The flunkies here sicken me—they fall over each other all day, ten of them on the stairs at once, like pickpockets waiting for a gold watch. Some of them don't even know me by sight—a fellow volunteered the gratuitous

information last night that if I were wise, I'd pass the port and stick to the old Madeira at dinner. Another of them told me that if I wanted a better place with the guns he'd see the keeper for me. Imagine that in your own house!"

"No one's house is one's own," was the quiet retort. "We keep up places nowadays for the common benefit of the pushing few. The socialistic tendency is growing upward. What we used to call the sanctity of home is unknown except to the dull middle classes. You should put your foot down, Quentin; put it down flatly, and have done with it."

They were in Quentin's study while they talked, a pretty room in a wing of the quasi-Elizabethan house, invaded rarely by the "crowd," and giving you a fine view of the Lickey Hills. Here from the window by which he stood listlessly, Quentin answered Philip when he spoke of putting his foot down.

"That's well enough; but it's not so easy to mend that which lies under the foot. A thwarted woman is not a pleasant person to live with, Philip. You know Alice, you know what her pleasures are. I could have my way—but what sort of a way would it be? No, compromise is the only remedy; and when compromise is necessary between man and wife, it's a poor look-out indeed."

He turned away from the window restlessly, and, crossing the room, he laid his hands upon Philip's shoulders.

"Now that we have caught you, we shan't let you go, Philip. Help me to keep off these wolves. You see how they annoy me. Stay and do duty for me—will you not?"

"I would with pleasure if it were not for this pup in Birmingham."

"My dear Philip, what has a man of your intellect to do with pups at Birmingham? What's it mean to you? —five hundred a year? Well, I'll give you a thousand to look after my letters. Haven't I told you so a dozen times. Confound your pups at Birmingham!"

Philip shook his head—the offer tempted him greatly.

"If I thought that you meant it, Quentin?"

"Am I a man, then, who says things he does not mean?"

"Well, I might stop a day or two and talk of it."

"Stop a month, a year; it is settled already as far as I am concerned."

Philip was about to answer when a loud tapping at the door arrested him, and Quentin saying, *sotto voce*, "One of the cats, for a fiver," old Lady Anne appeared in a great state of agitation, and flinging herself into an armchair, she blurted out her disastrous news.

"Mr. Caird, I'll stand it no longer! If that old woman is not a cheat, I haven't a pair of eyes in my head."

"My dear lady, pray calm yourself. To which of my guests are you referring?"

"Why, to that old Westerham woman! Three times she took out her diamond comb, and three times he made it no trumps. I saw it as plainly as I see your back. It's not to be tolerated; either she or I leaves this house to-day!"

"Oh, come, come; there is a mistake somewhere. Lady Westerham would never do such a thing."

"Not do it, when there's not a bridge party in all London which will sit down with her! I tell you——"

"My dear Philip," interposed Quentin blandly, "please tell Alice that Lady Anne wishes to have a few words with her. And, Philip——"

Philip had left the room, however, and feigning to call him back, Quentin strode after him and shut the door.

"You see," he said, resignedly, "even my study; it will be the bath-room next."

"And, of course, she is quite wrong about Lady Westerham."

"Heaven knows! I wouldn't trust one of them with sixpence. Let us go and see how the coverts are looking. The hounds meet in Quarry Wood to-morrow, and you must choose a horse before the best are gone."

Philip went cheerfully. He was much excited by Quentin's offer, and he no longer feared a closer association with Quentin's wife. The social campaign had alienated Alice not a little from her old friends. It was not that she liked them less, but that she had so little time to bestow upon them. At dinner that night she seemed bent upon making a capture, body and soul, of the young Cabinet Minister. To Philip she was gracious but indifferent. He had a few words with her before they sat down to bridge, and she told him how glad she was to have him at Knowl. But her desire to please the politician forbade any of those pretty asides she had been wont to indulge in, and Philip was not displeased that it should be so. "Thus ends the impossible," he said to himself; and, declining a seat at a bridge table, he went to Quentin's study and sat with him there until one o'clock in the morning.

The gamblers were still busy when at last Philip went up to bed. He could hear their chatter as he traversed the long corridor, from the musician's gallery of which the hall below is to be seen. Here, in the famous ingle, which is one of the greater glories of Knowl, two card-

tables were spread, and Philip observed, to his amused surprise, that the volatile Lady Anne had so far forgiven the maligned Marchioness of Westerham as to be taking a hand with her against Dicky and Bobby Fenton. "Plucking a pigeon," the irate lady had exclaimed at an earlier stage of the evening; "well, a good many people here have little enough on to pluck!" and certainly the toilet of the rapturous Dicky might have deserved the censure. Of this the wearer remained unconscious; she was making it "hearts" for Bobby Fenton all the time.

Philip watched the scene with interest for some minutes before mounting the second staircase. His room lay at the extreme end of the narrow corridor which runs the whole length of the third storey of the Manor house. It was almost dark up here, and exceedingly still; and, well as he knew Knowl, he paused a moment at the stairhead that he might locate his room exactly. Irresolute, and a little perplexed by the gloom, his step was slow and hesitating; and he had traversed no more than half of the corridor when a soft sound behind him, stealthy and almost uncanny, caused him to swing round upon his heel, and so to find himself face to face with a figure of the shadows.

A woman's figure undoubtedly. The gloom showed him that much. The figure of a woman hugging the wall, as though afraid of observation! His first judgment said that she was one of the maids, who did not wish to be discovered out of her room at such an hour. This was probable; but the woman's silence, even when she was discovered, made it apparent to him upon second thought that she was afraid, not of others, but of him. And why should a woman in such a situation be afraid of a man? Men do not go tittle-tattling to

the ladies of the house! There must be another reason. He crept on a little way, following a mean road at the dictates of his curiosity; but the moment it occurred to him that really it was not his business at all, and that he had no right to be watching the woman, he abandoned speculation and strode on down the corridor. Nothing more than pure coincidence could have so contrived it that he opened the door of his room at the very moment the woman entered her bedroom. For just an instant a stream of light flooded the corridor; he could see her face and figure quite plainly.

"My God!" he said, "it is Quentin's wife!"

CHAPTER XIII

A GOOD DAY AND AFTERWARDS

WITHIN his own bedroom Philip lit a pipe, and drawing a chair to the fireside, he sat down to have it out with himself. There are moments in the lives of every man and woman when some great truth of ill is presented to them, and finds them utterly unable to contemplate its existence. So Philip reasoned concerning the apparition.

"I pass a maid in the corridor and she reminds me of a woman I saw in Paris—it must be three years ago. Like a hysterical fool, I at once say that the two are one—the maid, the dancer; the servant of Knowl, the wife of its master. That alone should entitle me to a free pass to the nearest lunatic asylum. On the other hand, I once heard an ugly story—a devilish ugly story—of a Spanish-American woman who was said to have died in Paris, but who did not die there at all. Upon that comes a man from London, who declares that he has seen this woman since her accident, and can swear to her identity. Well, he is mistaken just as I am mistaken. Good God! What a pair! And why, why, why—why has this thing come across our path? I give that up emphatically."

He smoked on in silence for a little while, and then,

utterly unable to think of bed, he took up the parable again.

"There is a maid in this house so like the Spanish woman that I could almost swear upon the Testament to her identity. Possibly so. I might commit perjury all the same. These showy women bring their maids from everywhere. They like French ones because of their little tricks. A French maid will enamel an old hag and make her pass for forty-three—across a dinner-table. This girl is either Spanish or French, and one of the grand dames has brought her. French and Spanish women of the lower classes are as alike as two peas. I come up here after a second whiskey-and-soda, and Heaven knows how many of Quentin's cigars, and I imagine spooks—vastly unpleasant spooks under the circumstances. I'd like to bet a hundred that this girl's name is Jeanette, and that she comes from Dieppe or Trouville, or the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. Philip, my boy, go to bed. Go at once—the other man does not count. Yet why should he have lied to me? He had no object. He does not know her story. Oh, I give it up—go to bed, Philip, and think it out to-morrow."

But the brain is tenacious of such ideas as these; and Philip, the speculator, obstinately refused to obey Philip, the philosopher. A hundred perplexities assailed him. He told himself in one breath that the whole thing was a chimera of an excited imagination; the next favoured the dangerous and subtle suggestion that if, by a thousandth chance of ill, this strange tale were true, then the woman he had loved was no wife at all—nay, a woman so greatly wronged that in the story of pathetic misfortune no similar case might be found. For what were Alice's triumphs worth; her brilliant

successes, the homage and the favour of men, the slander and spite of women; of what account were they should it be proved that she had no better title to them than the meanest kitchen-maid in that house she ruled? A fall so great, so overwhelming, he scarcely dared to contemplate. Perhaps he charged Quentin with negligence amounting almost to criminality. What proof, he asked, had been obtained of the first wife's death before this second marriage was celebrated? Was Quentin content with a story told by any gossip, or had he searched the records and obtained official confirmation of the facts? Philip began to perceive that the truth was to be had for the asking by any man who chose to go to Paris and demand it. In justice to a family that he had always desired to serve, he determined not only that he himself would be the agent of the truth, but that the morning should find him diligent in inquiring amongst the strange maids who had come to Knowl. "If the woman is there, I will charge her," he said; but he prayed to God, for Alice's sake, that she might not be there.

A brief sleep, an hour before the dawn, found this idea recurring again and again in his brain, and when at last he shook it off his slumber was profound and heavy, and he did not wake until nearly nine o'clock. A loquacious valet, setting out his humble kit, reminded him that the hounds would draw the home coverts this morning, "and," said the fellow, who came from Bow, "I hope there'll be venison in the house for some days, sir." Philip did not think it worth while to point out to him the unedible nature of the fox, but he sprang up at once and took his bath quite cold—a piece of heroism he had deserted lately for the modern fashion of the healthier "tepid." The morning found him less pessi-

mistic, if slightly more excited. He was readier to say "Nonsense—just a fancy!" and when he had dressed himself and was downstairs amongst the crowd that had flocked to Knowl for the hunting breakfast, he quickly abandoned his braver schemes and contented himself with the Spaniard's promise—"to-morrow." A simple effort in logic settled everything for the moment. "If that woman were Quentin's wife, she would not wear an apron and carry hot water," he argued. And this seemed final.

The day was ideal, and ideal days are the best friend for the perplexed. A mild November morning suggested glimpses of the red sun through the haze which lay like a breath of silver upon wood and meadow. No breeze stirred the leafless branches of the splendid trees. The grass was green, and sparkled with beneficent dew. You breathed a cold air, invigorating yet full of the mellow autumn. And this mood of nature reacted upon the merry guests who came on cobs, in carts, even in motors, to breakfast at the Manor. For once the great house was entirely given over to the red-cheeked foxhunter and the dashing Dianas of the country. In the broadest of good-humoured dialect, with monstrous hands, these types of a dying age greeted Quentin, their host, and Alice at his side. Their one topic of conversation was the possibilities of scent; but their eyes were ever upon the vast sirloins, and in the matter of flagons they touched profound depths. Quentin declared that it was worth a good horse to see them eat. This was a house-party after his own heart; it suggested to him forgotten days in America, when men had ridden in to his lonely ranch and a wild carousal had established a new landmark of the years. He liked the rubicund honesty of it all—

the democrat within him said that these were men. And now, at least, Knowl Manor shone out as an English home should shine, through the open door and the hand which beckons every honest neighbour within.

A perfect Babel of voices! Before the great western porch horses enough to have equipped a regiment! Surely every type of colour and quality was there, from the great raw-boned bay to the docile grey, whose "leppers" were unmistakable. And what a medley of character and style—the town man, spotless in the clothes from Piccadilly; the hunting man in his tattered pinks of a decade ago; the country girl, with impudently red cheeks; my lady of Belgravia, as good a plucked 'un as any, though a maid had enamelled her cheeks and her hair was not paid for. All these go sweeping off together anon, and as they press forward toward Quarry Wood, Alice finds Philip Rose at her side, and is frankly glad to see him there.

"What was the matter last night?" she asked, turning the blue eyes so full upon him that he could read their very depths; "why were you so cross?"

"Was I?" said Philip, with that reticence which a woman instantly detects; "well, you didn't seem to mind it much."

"Oh, I like Mr. Danby," she exclaimed, averting her gaze suddenly; "he makes love so foolishly. It's just like flirting with the Government."

"A Conservative Government, I hope."

"Yes, a Government of all the talents."

"And no one particularly to make a cave. Well, I'm glad to see your party is out of office. You'll be flirting with Quentin next, for a change."

She was a little angry at this, and she looked at him almost malignantly.

"Is Quentin in need of an advocate?" she asked rather sharply.

He pacified her at once.

"With you, no; but I think that he is very much alone. All this bores him indescribably. You must have noticed it yourself."

"Oh, yes; I notice that he likes none of the things I like."

"But he says nothing because of his devotion to you."

"No, he only looks it."

"Do you think he is very well, Alice?"

"Why do you ask, Philip?"

"Because it seems to me that he might be better."

"You don't think he is ill?"

Here was real alarm. She reined back her horse, and her eyes plainly showed her fear. "She is still in love with him," Philip said to himself; but to her he said—

"Not ill—according to the faculty; at the same time plainly dissatisfied. Take him to the South of France for the winter. Go alone, and leave all this lot—the Dickys and the Bills, etcetera. They won't run away. You'll find them in town when you come back."

"You are an excellent ambassador, Philip. Could not Quentin say all this for himself?"

"Certainly he could; but he is too unselfish. I can imagine that he might be very eloquent if the occasion arose. You know how much I am your friend. Let me implore you, for old friendship's sake, never to promote this eloquence."

She did not answer this. Her anger was in some way just; nor did she follow Philip's reasoning at all. The things she was doing, the course she pursued,

could be justified by every precept of her class. If Quentin did not like it, it was due to his inability to enjoy a scheme of life to which he had not been born. Alice thought that he was jealous of her friends because they were her friends. Perhaps he envied the successes she had won, and desired to humiliate her by curtailing them. Pique could credit him with this, though reason were more just.

"I thought he would like the hunting," she exclaimed petulantly; "you know how well he rides. It would be absurd to go to Cannes now. Every one is in England."

"And every one is necessary for happiness?"

"My dear Philip, I could not live in a desert even to please you."

"Quentin would not ask you to, I am sure. Simeon Stylites of the pillar—even if it be a pillar of society—is by no means in his line. I don't think he is unreasonable, Alice. These people don't like him and he doesn't like them. There's the whole truth of it. There is just one person in the whole house for whom he would sell himself body and soul—but only one. She has it in her power to shape his future for him. Clever woman that she is, she will shape it wisely. I never had a doubt of it, and I am her friend."

They rode up to the covert side with the words, and others crowded about Alice—the young Cabinet Minister on a very quiet grey horse, Bobby Fenton managing a little black shockingly, and old General Oscar, who made his chestnut mare prance about as though he were parading at Whitehall. These people carried their persiflage to the field with them; but the real sportsmen were already waiting, with stiffened manes so to speak, for the rousing cry or the quiet break away which should herald a good day. Quentin himself, superbly

mounted upon a great bay horse, smoked a cigar apart with an old foxhunter ; he did not approach his wife when she rode up, although he watched her a little critically and, it may be, a little scornfully. Perhaps some image of the ideal of the wife he had wished to marry came to him at this moment, and he pictured himself as the master of a real home and the father of children. If this were so, he dismissed the thought quickly ; and that unconquerable tenderness toward Alice, which was the best impulse of his life, reminded him that she was but a woman, with a woman's weakness, and that all this frivolity might really be very harmless. Time would solve their difficulties ; he was a great believer in time.

A deep guttural sound from the old foxhunter at his side awoke Quentin instantly from his reveries, and sent him pell-mell, with the hundred or more excited folk, who echoed the cry " Gone away ! " and began to race all together down the narrow lane which bordered the wood. A gate at the end of this was the salvation of the majority, but as soon as the road was clear enough, Quentin put his horse at the ugly fence upon his right hand, and clearing it brilliantly, he found himself in a high meadow from which he had a superb view of hounds and riders and all the mellow landscape, brightened by the deep red rays of the hazy sun. A sportsman by every instinct of his being, such a spectacle nerved him to fine degrees of daring and risk. The huntsman had been the only man to jump the big fence with him, and these two now rode side by side far ahead of a straggling and discreeter field.

" He's holding for Barnt Green and the Red Spinney, sir ! " shouted the huntsman, as they took the first water side by side. Quentin shouted back that it

meant a good forty minutes, and no second horse. Then without another word he sat down in his saddle and began to enjoy to the full that sense of dominion and mastery which is never truly realised in sport save by a great rider upon a good horse.

"Steady, Jumbo; steady, you old fool! Do you think you're jumping a toll-gate? Go easy now, you octopus! You'll want your wind by and by—plenty, lad, plenty."

The big horse liked conversation; liked to be restrained by a pat upon the neck and the gentle rein of a master. He pulled himself together, and galloped with a steadier stride. There was no better fencer in all the Shires, and this fencer knew whom he carried. Together, master and horse, they declared a common instinct for the safest line and the surest places. Old Jumbo grunted when he jumped, like a fat man putting out an athletic effort; but his weight carried him where another would have failed. Once or twice he rapped timber, but the sure hand above saved him from a peck; and he galloped like a thoroughbred across the flat.

Quentin maintained to the full the advantage over the field which the first daring jump had obtained for him. Such vanity as he permitted to himself rejoiced in a good horse's victory over the loquacious company which had pestered him these many days past. He remembered how they had cackled of their exploits at dinner last night—this man of some ridiculous leap, that man of a transparent lie. He thought justice was being done to them now, and he rode on under the spell of an exhilaration which has no rival in all the gamut of sport. When a deep brook near Barnt Green checked the hounds and allowed the stragglers to come

up there were more red-faced foxhunters among them than guests of Knowl Manor. The young Earl, however, was there, and so was Philip Rose—both full of it and of the misfortunes behind.

"Mother's lost her skirt, and old Oscar picked it up!" cried Sir Percival gaily; "they're dodging each other across the second plough. He doesn't like to give it to her and she won't come up and take it. I wish some one would draw the old chap for *Punch*."

"Where's Danby?" Quentin asked, quite unconcerned about Lady Alcester's misfortunes.

Philip answered him with evident satisfaction.

"The Cabinet's in the brook and Alice is fishing him out. Bobby Fenton's chestnut turned it up with him—I saw them going off to do the village church together. That curate runs like a hare—I don't wonder they called him 'Hurry.' He'll be here before half the field now."

"They're generally in at the death," said Quentin drily; and then exclaimed, "It certainly was rather hot."

"And it's going to be hotter," cried Philip, as the hounds, who had been making a long cast down wind, began to run straight on again from the very spot where they were checked.

"Scent's too high for them," said the whipper-in, as he broke away with Quentin and Philip at his side; "leave it to the hounds, and it will come down, sir. I've often known it like that these November days. It'll be the Red Spinney after all," he added hopefully.

A good field had gathered at the check, and it now went away over the grass as though racing for a plate. Quentin did not see Alice amongst the company, and he concluded that she was still ministering to the

worldly comfort of the Cabinet Minister. If he resented this at all, it was because of his pride in her horsemanship. She rode magnificently, with consummate daring, though poor judgment. He would have liked to see her doing well that day—not rubbing down a tender political plant. But he forgot all about it after three minutes on the grass, and, settling down to the gallop, he permitted the old and unchangeable spell to grip him. They were galloping on high ground now; he could see Knowl lying upon the far side of the valley, and the old red-brick mansion recalled to him forgotten years and the lost days of an unhappy childhood. He had been the least favoured of his father's three sons; but fortune and death were flung into the balance of his fate, and he, who should have been still the exile, was now the master. The world said that he had nothing more to win—so powerless is it to read a man's life truly.

"I told you it would be hot," said a voice at his elbow. He looked round to see Philip still at his side.

"We shall kill or miss before Quarry Wood," he rejoined, and they galloped awhile in silence until Philip cried, "There's Joe Bass down—you'll have to hunt them now, Quentin."

"Then you'd better see to Joe—is he up again?" Quentin called back.

Joe was not the man to mind a header in the plough. "I can roll like a log," he used to say, and that was true. Coming down heavily over an ugly fence with concealed timber, Joe tried his capacity for rolling to its full extent. He was up and after his horse before you could have counted ten; but even Joe Bass could not catch a well-trained hunter who meant to be in at the death. So Quentin and Philip hunted the hounds until a bad check at the very entrance to a straggling hamlet

brought them to a confession of their own ignorance. They cast short up wind, they cast long down wind, alike vainly. Some one had headed the fox; but an old woman sitting on a stile with a basket on her arm dared them to say that she had done any wrong. "I ain't seen no fox and don't you say it!" was her stolid defiance. "The devil's in the village!" Quentin cried angrily. "We shall find him under a wash-tub."

Joe Bass came up while they were wrangling, and instantly set to work himself to verify their opinions. "It's that —— old woman!" he exclaimed, and he told her very freely the fate which would overtake her in the next world. Her retort, that as long as she had something to drink it was not of much consequence what befell her, was somewhat spoiled in effect by the hounds suddenly stiffening their tails and making straight for the village school, to an out-house, into which they went pell-mell, and thence into the schoolmaster's parlour. Such a to-do had not been seen in Quarry Lane for many a day; and when some one called out that the fox was under the schoolmaster's bed, the excitement knew no bounds. Perhaps the worthy pedagogue, who taught fifteen urchins for as many shillings a week, alone failed to see the excellent humour of the situation. He was thinking of his lares and penates, and piteously reminding Sir Raymond Carr, the Master of the Hunt, that he meant to have the law of him. "If you call yourself a gentleman, you'll whip those dogs out of my bed!" he repeated, while the urchins watched him open-eyed and wondering. Would he cane Sir Raymond? It was sad to see greatness so fallen from its stool.

"Hold your tongue, man; of course you'll be paid!" Sir Raymond hastened to assure him. All could hear

a terrible hullabaloo going on in the bedroom upstairs. The deep baying of the hounds, the huntsman's voice, the crash of broken crockery, the rending of wood—you might have thought that a squadron of Uhlans had taken possession of the house. As for the cunning author of all this mischief, he was on the top of an old "four-poster" by this time, and he bit savagely at anything and everything within his reach, while the hounds leaped and bayed and fought, and Joe Bass cursed them with all the eloquence which good beef and beer can inspire in a Shireman.

"Where am I going to sleep this night—will you please to tell me that?" the schoolmaster asked of the grinning field now gathered about the house. Some one in the crowd retorted that he would have no difficulty in waking early, and at this his democracy asserted itself, and he described the company mildly as "loafers," "snobs," "the idle rich," and "the scum of Britain." When the fox had been killed and held up at the window, he would have gone on to denounce the infamy of sport in general and field sports in particular; but the excited hounds swarmed out of the house after old Joe, and the pedagogue's courage failed him. He was upon his way to the police station when they lost sight of him.

There was a refreshing display of flasks and sandwich-boxes when the brush had been cut, and upon the men's part an instinctive movement to the courtyard of the little inn at the further end of the hamlet. So straight had been the run, and so fast, that the Master decided not to put the hounds in again; and after an impromptu lunch of a delightful kind, the field broke up into groups for the long ride back toward Knowl. Quentin did not know quite how he contrived it, but he was only a little

way out upon the main road from the village when he found Alice at his side, and, for a wonder, no stranger to intrude upon their privacy. The *rencontre* pleased him; he was glad to think that she chose him of all the company, and as his horse was very tired he dismounted and walked by her side. He hoped much of the talk he would have with her.

"I thought you were mending Danby," he said, putting a hand upon hers in an unwonted gesture of grateful recognition. Her quick glance behind her to be sure that no one watched them did not offend him, for he understood how heinous a crime is love between man and wife in certain circles of society. She was very pretty, very girlish in her smart habit, and the wind which had played havoc with her curls left them in a becoming disorder which no maid could have imitated. Nor was she less pleased than he to find herself alone with him. Perhaps the events of the last few days had enlightened her as to the precise worth of a few of the featherbrains who made love to her under the roof of the man they called their friend.

"Mr. Danby is mended," she exclaimed emphatically, in answer to his question. "I sent him home to bed."

"He could actually tear himself away?"

"The horse did that for him. And he hadn't even the good sense to duck when I rode up. We nearly had a fearful cropper."

"I'm very glad you didn't, Alice. Can he ride at all? Is he any good?"

"He rides like an asthmatic curate. You can hear him breathing across the field. He only had one foot in the stirrup after the first fence. But it was a large foot," she added slyly.

"At any rate his opponents won't accuse him of

sitting on the fence. I wonder how you really like all this business. You must get very tired of it sometimes."

"A woman is never tired of doing what other women would like to do. That is the first and last axiom of the sex, Quentin. If we cannot see and be seen, we perish. I like my parties because they are mine. If they were somebody else's, I should probably dislike them very much indeed."

"Ah, that's just it. In so far as they score off your friends they are successful. Nothing else counts. I suppose there was a time, in the Stone Ages, when the old-fashioned traditions of hospitality had something at the back of them. Whatever would you do, Alice, if a poor relation arrived upon the scene? Such things must happen sometimes."

"Not in well-regulated families. I should simply order the carriage for the next train."

"But the poor relation might insist upon squatting—like the gipsies. Imagine that he, or preferably 'she,' declined to go!"

"My dear boy, if we imagine dreadful things, we deserve them. What you mean to say is that you dislike these people very much, and wish to see the back of them. Isn't that it?"

"If you press me, it is that precisely. I no longer wish to keep a hotel, but a home. Say it's very unreasonable and have done with it. I want my home and my wife."

"And your dog and your horse and your golf clubs. Shall I tell all the people to go at dinner to-night? It would be a little unusual in my set."

"But not in mine. Is that what you would say? My excellent ancestors, you know, merely kept a shop,

where they sold steel—thousands of tons of it to build ships and other unnecessarily vulgar things ; your friends, I remember, distinguished themselves otherwise."

Alice flushed at this. Certainly the family escutcheon by no means shone with untarnished lustre. Her own father had died greatly in debt ; her uncle had been divorced under disgraceful circumstances ; an elder brother, now dead, had cut the poorest figure possible in the army. But she thought it positively brutal of Quentin to refer to it, and, temper guiding her, she turned her horse without a word and went cantering across the fields to rejoin the guests she had deserted for Quentin's sake. " He is utterly selfish," she said as she went. " I believe he hates me for being happy." She could understand neither the man nor the mood. It never occurred to her that a real longing for her affection and her sympathy were at the bottom of these many bickerings which had lately come into their lives.

Quentin watched her go with sad eyes. He was conscious of a certain accidental brutality which he would have been the first to resent in another. Perhaps he quarrelled with his ancestors who had left him by heredity no legacy of fine breeding and the unattainable manners of the true aristocrat. " A gentleman would not have said it," he admitted. Many times in his life he had accused himself of one of these outbursts which were to be set down to the class from which he had sprung. In many things which the world called culture he was but an imitator. The veneer of a careful study chipped at the touch of anger, and the plainer wood of breeding showed beneath. That Alice of all others should have discovered it was a cause of the keenest self-reproach to him. He determined to apologise frankly, and without reservation, so soon as he found

himself alone with her. There had never been a moment in their married life when he so greatly desired the fullest understanding with her or would so readily have said, "I will not be the cloud upon your pleasures; enjoy yourself as you please; I rejoice at your success." Thoughts alternating with gloom and hope followed him as he rode back to Knowl. It had been a weary tramp through deserted lanes; but when Alice left him he mounted his horse again and ambled across the fields towards the park surrounding the Manor. A winter's sun was on the very rim of the horizon by this time, and a white mist crept over the valley and lay in drifting wisps above the pastures. Twilight caught him at the gates of a lodge upon the northern side of the park, and it was growing quite dark when the lamps of his house burst upon his view with all their cheery suggestion of warmth and laughter and home. Home should be home to him this night, he said. He would seek Alice out without delay, and make what reparation he could. Impatience, in truth, set spurs to his tired horse, and he began to canter across the grass, when, without any ostensible cause, apparently fearful of the half lights, the old hunter shied violently, and colliding with the trunk of a great elm tree, he flung his master heavily and bolted across the park.

Quentin staggered to his feet, but instantly fell again. "My God!" he cried; "it was Isabella's face!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE QUEST

ALICE was going up to dress for dinner when the butler came running to the hall with the earliest news of the accident.

"There's something happened, my lady!" he called up to her as she stood at the head of the staircase; "master's horse has come back to the stables alone."

The importance of the tidings pleased this ancient Vincent greatly. He had no regard whatever for the trembling girl whose white hand rested upon the balustrade, while she bade him repeat his words.

"Mr. Caird's horse—who says so—who told you, Vincent?"

"Harry, the groom, my lady; he's at the door now waiting to speak to you."

Many thoughts were running together in Alice's head—fear, disbelief, instant pictures of the future, bitter regrets of the past; but she did not for one instant lose her presence of mind.

"Send into the park at once. Let every groom go. Mr. Rose is in the billiard-room. Inform him, Vincent. I will come myself when I have my cloak. And, Vincent, tell the chauffeurs. They must light their lamps and come with me."

The butler rolled away to do her bidding; and by the time the tidings were cried through the house and the tired men had snatched up their hats or run to their bedroom for their boots, a motor with an immense acetylene lamp stood before the porch and Alice was at the door with Philip by her side.

"Philip, Philip, what can it mean? You know how well he rides."

"The brute may have shied; perhaps Quentin stopped somewhere and he bolted. It can't be much. Get into the car; I am going to run."

"Oh, God knows what I feel for him, Philip! And I was cross when I left him. Please come with me—if—if—oh, you know that I dare not. Come with me, Philip!"

He obeyed her instantly, and took his place beside her in the car. The younger men of the party, Percival and his Cambridge friends, were already racing across the park like deer, and halloaing as they went. Some of them carried their bicycle lamps, others waved lanterns brought by willing grooms from the stables; but the great Bleriot of the motor shone out above them all, and was a very flame of fire moving with incredible swiftness down the avenue of the park.

"You left him on the Barnt Green road; then he would have come in with the rest of us by the North Lodge. I wonder we didn't see him. We should have done if there had been an accident. Perhaps he rode down to the village to see Phipson, the doctor. The horse was left outside and broke away. It's the most natural thing I can think of."

"But you're only thinking of it, Philip; dear God, how my heart beats! You are telling me that because I wish to hear it. He never goes down to the village—why should he have gone to-day? Listen, please; was

that his voice? I thought I heard it. Listen, Philip, what is it?"

"It's the whirr of the motor—no, there's something else. Pull up, there—Johnson, stop a moment."

The car came to a stop slowly. In the far distance the sound of voices halloaing "Mr. Caird, Mr. Caird!" were faintly to be heard. A winter mist lay heavily upon the park, and the lanterns shone through it like globes of watery light. From time to time the sound of a galloping horse was to be distinguished in that desert of silence, where the voice of frost mingled with the softer whispers of the night. But no one answered the seekers—there was no news of Quentin.

"I must have been deceived," Philip admitted reluctantly. "It was those fellows halloaing; let us go on to the lodge. You left him there, did you not?"

"On the road a mile from the gate. I came across the fields—I don't think that he followed me. I wanted him to, but he did not. I told you we had quarrelled."

"Not seriously, Alice; there could have been nothing like that."

"Oh, no, it was very pitiful; it seems so now. He did not like my party, and I thought it selfish of him. I shall never forgive myself if he is hurt. I am learning a bitter lesson, Quentin."

"Yes, yes; but you must not reproach yourself. These things occur in every life. We must find him and forget all about it. Here is the lodge and Flaxman. I wonder if he knows anything?"

Quite a little company had gathered at the lodge kept by Flaxman, the head gardener of Knowl. Grooms on steaming horses addressed servant and guest alike in those familiar terms which tragedy permits. An open door and uncurtained windows permitted a volume of

cheery light to stream out upon the white road and the bushes of the little garden. Flaxman himself, with his wife and child, was talking to bare-headed General Oscar when the motor drove up. In spite of his sixty years, the General had been first into the park when the alarm was raised, the soldier in him awakened, and he led the search party with a soldier's instinct.

"Have they seen Quentin?" was Alice's instant question when the car came up. The General answered her almost brusquely—

"He passed the lodge at half-past four; Flaxman saw him. If he has not gone on some errand of his own he is in the park. We shall find him, my dear child," he added with gentle kindness; "we cannot possibly miss him."

She cowered back into the carriage, trembling before the shadows of her fears. A vivid imagination harped upon the more dreadful possibilities. If Quentin had met with a trifling accident some one would have discovered him, or he would have reached home somehow. The worst must be contemplated. She began to believe that he was dead.

"I am so helpless, Philip!" she cried despairingly. "What can a woman do? What can I do to help him?"

Philip had returned to her after a brief talk with the General, from whom he caught something of the soldier's manner.

"The grooms have gone back for your St. Bernards; it's Oscar's idea. The old chap has his wits about him, anyway. I wonder we did not think of it before. If he's in the park we shall find him now. I believe that he's with Phipson, as I said; the horse just broke away from the gate and Quentin's looking for him."

"You don't believe it, Philip; why say it? The time has gone by for that."

"My dear Alice," he said quietly, "the time has never gone by to hope."

Alice could make no reply to this, and they turned the car and began to feel their way back to the Manor. At Philip's suggestion they quitted the drive, and following the greensward beneath the great trees they cast the powerful rays of the immense lamp to the right and left of them as they went, scaring the rabbits and sending many a wood pigeon hurtling from the trees. Such a journey would never be forgotten by either of them. This rushing golden wave of light, hovering now upon the grass, now upon the gnarled trunks, cast upon all things a sheen of radiance which could beautify the meanest shape and clothe with dazzling splendour the barest carpet of the turf. Odd figures, fearful and fantastic, passed before them upon the curtain of the mist. Every tree became a sentinel, which might watch the body of him they sought. Weird sounds of the mocking wind derided the engine's burr and rang dolefully in their ears. The far horizon shone with the human glowworms who swung their lanterns as they moved from copse to copse.

Philip did not speak to Alice during the second quest. A low sob escaping her lips, he pressed her hand in his own, though he had no further word of comfort for her. His sounder judgment feared her premonition of evil; his own story of Quentin's visit to the doctor's house failed him in the quieter moments of reflection. None the less, the complexity of that which should have been a simple mystery altogether baffled him. If Quentin were dead, his body should lie on the drive at some point between the North Lodge and the Manor House.

They had searched every yard of that road with their all-discovering lamp and had found no figure upon it. Clearly, then, the worst was a bad fall—perhaps a wounded man who had tried to crawl home and had fainted by the way. He did not think that the truth could long be hidden; and when the baying of a great hound spoke of General Oscar's stratagem, he knew that they stood upon the brink of discovery.

And what would discovery mean? A shape huddled upon the grass; eyes looking up to the branches they could not see; ears which would be for ever deaf; dust waiting for the dust—a fearful and wonderful thing created of God for this eternal bed of earth and mould? Would it be that or the glad cry and the well-known voice, a woman's tears or a woman's joy, the welcome of the open door or the surpassing silence of death and fatality?

Philip believed the worst; he knew not why.

CHAPTER XV

DISCOVERY

MONARCH, a superb St. Bernard, who was more than any brother to Quentin Caird, found his master lying prone upon the soft grass of a spinney some thirty paces removed from the North Lodge drive. He had escaped the searchers when he came upon the senseless man, and some minutes passed before his dismal howling attracted General Oscar to the spot. It was never very difficult, the old soldier used to say, to tell a live man from a dead one, and he had but to cast a lantern's light upon Quentin's face to see that he lived. More for the moment he could not do; the great dog guarded his discovery with savage voice. He was called off with difficulty, threatening them, and looking with a good instinct for his mistress. For Alice, indeed, all waited, the grooms crying one to the other and the horseman pursuing the motor at a gallop.

The young Earl was the first to make himself heard above the engine's din, and he caught the car when it was but a stone's throw from the Manor House.

"Alice, Alice—it's all right—over yonder by the spinney—we've found him—he's hurt—they don't think badly—come along, all of you—I say it's all right!"

The girl heard him, comprehending but this, that

Quentin lived and was hurt. Her breathing became the quicker for his words. She tried to speak to Philip, but could not, and hot tears coursing down her cheeks gave her passionate relief.

"I told you so," said Philip, utterly unable to conceal his own excitement. "He's lamed himself, and can't walk, I suppose. Don't cry like that, Alice; you'll only upset him. I'm sure it can't be much—he was only cantering."

She wiped her eyes with her hands as a schoolgirl might have done, and answered him with a quiet reproach his tame anticipations justified.

"You know nothing, Philip. Please do not torture me. Is it there where the lanterns are?"

"Yes, by the Cedar spinney. We came the wrong side of the road. How that dog barks—it's lucky we had the car."

And then to the chauffeur—

"As fast as you can, Johnson; they are waiting for us."

They arrived at a moment when Quentin, coming to his senses for the second time since he fell, raised himself upon his right arm and stared blankly at the figures of the mist and the lanterns which stood on the ground about him.

"Who's there?" he asked in a dazed way; and Oscar, trying to support him, said, "All of us, my dear Quentin." Then he repeated the question aimlessly, and uttered a sharp cry of pain upon it.

"Where's my wife—where's Alice?"

"She is just coming, sir," one of the grooms replied; "yon's the light of the car."

"Ah, I thought she would be here," he rejoined, still but half possessed of his senses—and then he said

something which astonished them more than any news of his accident.

"She must not see me. Please take her back to the house. Oscar, you will do that. I must not see her."

Alice came through the press at the moment. They fell back before her respectfully, and she, with white face and dry eyes, knelt by his side and kissed his lips.

"My dearest, dearest husband—Quentin, what is it? How have they hurt you, Quentin?"

Wild eyes looked into her own. A spasm of pain crossed the man's face and he drew his lips back from her.

"I fell—I think my ankle is broken, Alice. Don't you trouble about it. Oscar is seeing to me. It's nothing at all—just nothing at all. Run back to the house, little wife; you will catch cold here."

She laughed lightly at the impossibility of it, and the woman in her claiming its due, she began to order them about with an authority which they welcomed.

"Who has gone for Doctor Phipson?" she asked of Oscar.

"Harry, the groom."

"We must make a litter, General. He cannot possibly go in the carriage."

"Percy is pulling up hurdles now. I have sent to the house for a mattress."

"And brandy."

"Of course; they cannot be long now."

She turned to her husband again, and clasped his hands more tightly.

"Are you in pain, Quentin? Yes, I am sure that you are, dearest. How cold your hands feel—my poor, poor boy!"

She kissed him again, and fearing to touch his limbs,

repeated her appeals to the others to hasten. When Phipson, the doctor, black-whiskered and grave, came racing up in the motor from the village, the hurdles and the straw of the impromptu litter were already to hand and willing arms lifted the patient. The doctor had already dosed him with brandy, and run clever fingers over his limbs. He had nothing to conceal from Alice, and he told her candidly what he thought.

"The leg is broken above the ankle; I don't think it's a case of collar-bone, though the arm is hurt. What I don't like is the wet and the cold. But we must pull him through, dear lady; yes, we must pull him through, you and I. Did you tell them to light fires everywhere? —that's necessary, of course. I'm glad they found me in. It's my night for bridge at the Howards'; well, they'll have to play three, that's all."

Alice did not resent the sigh which attended this very human confession. Excitement was a little abated by this time; but a heavy grief, a great pity for her husband took its place, and she blamed herself above all that this misfortune had come upon them. If she had not been so quick and hasty they would have ridden home together, and possibly no accident at all would have happened. In any case, Quentin would not have lain there for two or three hours without help. For this she accused herself, responding to that impulse of pity which rarely fails to be attended by heart-searching and regret.

The great doors of Knowl stood open to the night when the dismal cavalcade arrived. Some of the women had been dressing when the news was told, and they did not hear it until they came down to dinner. These grouped themselves about the roaring fire within the monstrous ingle—a white-faced company, shivering

with apprehensions which a neurotic age so readily creates. Such conversation as followed was left chiefly to the robust Lady Anne and the wasp-faced Lady Alcester. The latter had little sympathy for the missing man, but a great deal for her "poor, poor girl." In the secret chambers of her thoughts she was already planning a great match for Alice with the young Duke of Renton, or, failing him, with Danby of the Cabinet, whose foolishness would certainly be rewarded by a peerage. Lady Anne, on the other hand, posed as a benevolent optimist. "He's down in the village—perhaps we had better not ask why," she had said with a callous brutality which was akin to common sense. When they told her that Quentin lay in the park with a broken leg and perhaps a dislocated collar-bone, she sniffed and looked personally aggrieved. "A man with a young wife has no right to take such risks—there's risk enough in taking one," was her rejoinder. Lady Alcester, however, ran upstairs to see that everything was ready in the bedroom. She had some relics of the maternal instinct still by her. The girls of the party did not know what to say. It was a cruel interruption to their fun!

And so, it appears, that the lasting impression of this vexatious misfortune remained for the guests of Knowl an exasperating postponement of that which is above all functions of the day not to be postponed—their dinner. Neither Alice nor her mother bethought her of sending word downstairs that this function should proceed—they remained in an adjoining room while messengers were sent to Birmingham for a "second opinion," and the worthy Phipson, who could set a bone as well as any man in England, did his best to look pleased at such grateful confidence. He had dismissed

every one from the room save Philip Rose and Lady Westerham's maid, who had once been in a hospital, and having exhorted them to see that nurses were engaged immediately, he did all that the best of his profession could have done. His final verdict was reassuring, perhaps a little unexpected.

"A simple fracture, madame—nothing more. I will go back and make new splints, though these will do for the time being. Keep him warm, and lose no time in getting your nurses. You can send a car to Birmingham, I suppose?"

"It shall go now," Alice said. "Why should I not nurse him until they come?"

"Because you are too anxious, my lady; however, I'll not lock you out. Go in and have a peep at him, and tell me what you think."

She entered the room gladly enough, and went up at once to the bedside. Quentin's eyes were closed, but he was very far from sleep.

"It is I, dearest," she said very gently. "I have come to nurse you."

"You good little wife," he answered in a low whisper; and then drawing her down to him, "forgive me, Alice; forgive me, sweetheart."

She did not know what he meant, nor would she ask him. Had she read his meaning truly, the tragedy of her life would have begun in that hour.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FRIEND

A BROKEN leg in a hunting country is not reckoned of much account, and the guests of Knowl took it lightly enough. So soon as it became known that a simple fracture was the chief mischief, the Lady Anne immediately voted an adjournment to the dining-room, while others sent for "Bradshaw" to hunt up their trains for to-morrow. "We shall do no good by going without our dinner," the old lady said sweetly, "and hunger doesn't mend any bones. I shall tell Vincent to go on. You can put it on to my shoulders—I'm strong enough to bear it." A unanimous vote carrying the motion, dinner was served as they desired; and after dinner the bridge tables found shameless sitters, who departed from their usual practice so far as to send "dummy" up at intervals to ask after the patient. The arrival of a big-wig and two hospital nurses from Birmingham shortly after midnight added an excuse for another rubber when the great man had pronounced his verdict. The leg was capitally set, he declared, and everything was going on well. "But keep him quiet, my lady," he said to Alice, when he took her aside to impress upon her the solemnity of his utterances; "he is very restless, very excited—you must keep him quiet at any cost.

I will now beg a little supper of you, and then have another look at him. You can spare me a garret, perhaps. Thank you, this is my first visit, positively my first to your charming mansion."

He said it with an eye to a "future occasion"; but the hint was quite lost upon Alice. Now that her more serious fears were removed, and she understood that it was nothing more than a somewhat grave accident, she prepared herself quietly for quiet weeks of nursing. That her "first" party should be thus curtailed was certainly vexing; but the Westerhams would have gone to-morrow, in any case, and the others could be asked again later on. "Mother," of course, would remain. Truth to tell, it would be very difficult to get rid of her, for "mother" had found exceedingly comfortable winter quarters, and had no intention of sacrificing herself upon the altar of her daughter's privacy. That which troubled Alice more seriously was Quentin's somewhat unaccountable manner when she approached his bed or attempted to wait upon him. He appeared actually to prefer the assistance of strangers, and his eyes, which usually met her gaze so frankly, were averted when she stood beside him. The one human being in all Knowl whose society he desired was Philip Rose, and for him he asked more than once, and seemed to be impatient at his absence.

"What is Philip doing, Alice? Why doesn't he come up?"

"He is having his dinner, dearest; he must eat, you know. Cannot I take his place—just for a little while?"

"I don't mean that—you are so good and gentle; but I want to speak to Philip. I have something to say to him."

"He shall come up directly he has done his dinner. Are you in great pain, my poor boy? I'm sure it must be very terrible, and, dear Quentin, I feel so helpless."

"Don't worry yourself, little wife; that old fool Jumbo never liked the shadows. It was my fault—he wasn't in hand and the tree was in the way. I shall be well enough in a week or two, and we'll have another party. Of course, you won't let the people go—that would be too ridiculous."

Alice bent over the bed and kissed him. Her soft hand rested upon his smooth cheeks; her lips touched his closed eyes very tenderly. She felt drawn towards him sympathetically as she had never yet been in all the days of their married life. Her love asserted itself victoriously; she wondered that she had ever doubted it, or endangered by folly the sacred intimacy, the supreme possession with which marriage had endowed her. Her satisfaction she found in the determination that these reproaches would never be heard again. Henceforth she would live for the man who had so greatly loved her.

"You must not worry yourself about anything at all, Quentin. I shall send them all away and have you to myself. We will keep Philip, though; he will be company for you. The others must go, every one of them. Now try and sleep, dearest boy; I am sure that you are tired out."

"I will sleep when I have seen Philip—I want to talk to him. Please send him up to me, Alice."

"Yes, yes, Quentin; he shall come at once."

She set it down to the sick man's humour, and, surrendering to the obstinacy of his desire, she went downstairs anon, and failing to find Philip at any of the card-tables she sent Vincent, the butler, to bring him. That

worthy having washed his hands in the air upon a tedious expression of obsequious sympathy, informed her that he believed Mr. Rose to be closeted with the housekeeper, a piece of news which astonished Alice very much until Philip appeared and declared lightly that Mrs. Rously was so anxious to know what the doctor from Birmingham said that he had gone down to her room purposely to inform her.

"They are all devoted to him, body and soul—as you and I, Alice. Poor chap, he'll feel this terribly—during the hunting season, too. Don't be disturbed at his whim—I expect he wants me to see that no one makes a fuss about it. It can't be anything else."

The subterfuge was well enough, but Philip went upstairs with a heavy heart for all that. Unlike the others, he had some suspicion of the true story of the night, and he did not believe in any horse clever enough to get rid of Quentin Caird when Quentin had a mind to stay. "He has seen the woman as I saw her," he said at once. It was no longer possible to delude himself with this theory or that concerning a supposed hallucination. The plain, the overwhelming fact that the Spanish woman lived, and, for some purpose best known to herself, had come to Knowl in the guise of a waiting woman, stared him in the face and would not be denied. How to meet it, how to answer or to deal with it, he knew no more than the dead. But he was resolved to stand by Quentin to the end, and to be a true friend to him and to the wife upon whom such suffering must come.

A single electric lamp standing at the bedside alone illuminated the famous "Queen Catherine" room when he entered it. There the sallow-faced hospital nurse, disposing herself quietly to the mathematical duties of her

night, consented with poor grace to the confidential interview. "The gentleman is not to be excited—Dr. Ringross is very precise about that, sir," she protested; but Philip soon pacified her, and, drawing up a chair to the bedside, he asked as cheerily as he could how things were going.

"They won't let you talk, old man—your prescription is sleep. You shall tell me to-morrow how it all happened."

Quentin shifted his position in the bed as far as he was able, and fixed his eyes resolutely on Philip's when he answered him.

"I must talk to-night, Philip; I must know. I can't sleep until I know. There's no one in the room, is there? Are you quite sure that Alice is not here?"

"There's not a soul about except myself—the nurse has gone to get her supper and Alice is with the 'bridgers' downstairs. You can speak to me quite frankly, Quentin, if you must. Won't it keep until the morning, though?"

"It won't keep an hour, a minute, Philip. I must tell you now; I must know. You are the only man I can speak to. Philip, it's the greatest trouble of my life—for God's sake be my friend!"

"I'm that always, Quentin; there isn't a man on earth I would help more willingly. Tell me the trouble. It will be lighter if we share it."

Quentin did not immediately respond; his hands fingered the bedclothes nervously, and his eyes cast about as though they feared to encounter the gaze of a third person. When he did speak, his utterances were quick and without sequence.

"Do you remember speaking of Isabella Montanes, the Spanish woman you saw in Paris? Yes, you would

not forget it. We were somewhere in London—was it in Hyde Park? You remember the name—I told you that she was my wife. Afterwards she died in France—I had the papers from the Consul, and they were official. We were married in America, when I was a very young man, Philip; she had no parents living, and I met her in San Francisco. She was singing for a living there, and my luck was low. I married her—yes, there is something like this in a good many lives, Philip; it's no good asking why. We lived together a little while—I never reproached her when she left me at her own wish, and we both admitted that it was a mistake. They told me she had gone to Europe with some Spanish dancers. Then I heard of her death in Paris, and one of the company wrote and sent me the papers —it was just when I came into my money. I met Alice a year afterwards, and proposed to her—you see I had the papers from the Consul, and that was official. Do you think I did right, Philip? Would you say I was too easily satisfied?"

He paused for his answer excitedly; his eyes were watching Philip's lips as though they would rebuke him for some great neglect. Philip, however, avoided his glance, and, plucking musingly at the fringe of the bed-clothes, he put a question as though the reply to it were of no great moment—merely an incident of the story he had heard.

"Did the papers come to you from the Consul, or were they sent by the lady's friends?"

"By her friends, of course—that would be natural. The leader of their company wrote to me, he said at my dead wife's request. You can't suppose that the Consul would have written unasked."

"No, no; he wouldn't have written until you wrote

to him, Quentin. That came afterwards, I suppose, when your lawyers communicated with him."

"My lawyers had nothing to do with it—why should they? You don't mean to suggest that I was the victim of a lie? What object would it have served? Who would have benefited by it? A stranger writes to me and says that my wife is dead; he incloses me the official certificate, the doctor's report, and the newspapers describing the accident. Why should the man have taken it upon himself to do this if it were not true? I had not seen Isabella for some years. I never troubled her; I did not know whether she were dead or alive. It is incredible to think that such a woman should have cared twopence about my welfare—more incredible to ask me to believe that the manager of her company lied to oblige her. I accepted the certificates and the man's assurance. You would have done the same in my place."

He had worked himself up almost to a hazardous earnestness by this time, and whatever answer Philip wished to make he kept it to himself, being content for the moment to humour rather than to interrogate the sick man. Obviously no letter had been written to the Consul, and the terrible aftermath followed upon that seed-time of carelessness and credulity. Philip had no doubt whatever that the facts were the worst he could have heard; but his face betrayed nothing of his feelings, and he went on as calmly as though he had been speaking of a trivial matter.

"It is always impossible to say what one would have done under any given set of circumstances, Quentin. The wrong thing, perhaps—it's most likely, anyway. You didn't write to the Consul, and you were quite sure Isabella was dead. Why worry yourself about it then—why speak of it?"

"Because I saw Isabella in the park to-night."

"Oh, now you are talking nonsense."

"As true as God's in heaven I saw her—she crossed the drive before me, and the horse shied at her black cloak. That's what unnerved me. I can stick on a horse as well as any man; but when I saw her face looking up at me out of the shadows, I lost control and went under. And she never turned round to see what had happened—I think she was afraid. Would it be that, Philip? Would she avoid me, do you think? She has done no wrong; why should she be afraid?"

Philip did not know how to answer him. The earlier impulse which prompted him to say that it was mere hallucination surrendered upon reflection to his better sense; and he perceived that feigned incredulity would serve no useful purpose, either for the moment or afterwards. They must have it out here and now. The happiness of two lives depended upon the issue. Terrible as it was, equivocation could but make it worse. Philip suffered agonies himself when he remembered what it must mean to Alice. He strode up and down the room as though rest were impossible.

"My dear, dear Quentin," he said, "remember, we may still be mistaken. Is it worth while to build up a great bogey just to laugh at it afterwards? You see a face in the park, and you believe it to be the face of your dead wife. It may have been. I will not deny that. Let us be sure first and do what is right afterwards."

"I was not mistaken, Philip; a man has not lived long hours with any woman to forget her face. I am sure of what I saw as of my own existence. Great God! why should I imagine it? Does a man recall a past like that out of his own imagination? I saw her as clearly as I see you."

"Was she coming up to the house or leaving it?"

"I don't know. It was just like a vision. I saw her face and then the black figure passing between the trees. She may have been going anywhere; she may be in the house now."

"I don't believe it for a moment. But I shall find out. Does it occur to you, Quentin, that a woman of her stamp would only hunt you up for one purpose?"

"You mean money?"

"Money certainly—it needn't trouble you. Leave it to me; give me *carte blanche*. Oh, I know. You are going to say, 'My honour forbids blackmail,' and all that sort of thing. You are wrong. This woman, if she is alive—and that is still to be proved—if she is alive she has a claim upon you. There is no question of blackmail about it. You keep her tongue still for the sake of another woman who has a greater claim upon you. I am no professor of domestic jurisprudence, but I will take upon myself to say that here is the one case in a thousand which a man is right to hush up. For God's sake, don't let any cheap sentiment intrude! Our duty is to hush it up for the moment, and afterwards to determine what is the right course. We may decide to tell Alice; I cannot say. But I am going to see the other woman first—I start now. Quentin, will you leave this to me, leave it entirely to the man who is your friend? Try to do so for your wife's sake—yes, for the sake of the little woman whose happiness is dear to us both."

He approached the bed and took the sick man's hand in his own. The effort of confession had cost Quentin much, and he sighed deeply. Weakness disposed him to rely absolutely upon another, and to set hope high above circumstance.

"Yes—yes, to you, Philip," he said. "Go at once; do not lose a moment. I shall not sleep until you come again."

"Now that is nonsense," Philip said, but in so gentle a voice and so reassuringly that Quentin hid his face from him and something like a sob escaped him.

"For Alice's sake, Philip," he said.

Philip answered—

"Yes, for her."

CHAPTER XVII

ISABELLA MONTANES

THERE is no social difficulty, whatever be its nature, in which a confidant is not a danger. From the moment in which he took Quentin's burden upon his shoulders Philip stood resolutely by his intention to act alone. Of all at Knowl he did not know a single human being whom he might approach upon a matter so momentous or so urgent. Whatsoever was to be done, that should his own wit accomplish.

He was a clear thinker, and the mathematical habit shaped this problem for him with some precision. To find the woman, to question her, to learn her character and her intentions, to buy her silence and to ensure the stability of the bargain—there was the task before him. So apparently simple and yet so incredibly dangerous! For a man's life and a woman's happiness might depend upon it. Quentin's recovery, Alice's future would be foretold in the words which Isabella Montanes might speak to-morrow. Philip tried to act calmly and with circumspection. His first visit was to the men's quarters, where he awoke Johnson, the chauffeur, from a heavy sleep and told him the best lie the instant could invent.

"Mr. Caird is very ill, and I am anxious to telegraph

to London," he said. "If it's known, some people may be annoyed. Do you think you could run me into Birmingham without any one hearing anything about it, Johnson?"

Johnson rubbed sleepy eyes, and when he quite understood that the petrol tank was not on fire, and that no one had run away with his beloved car, he admitted the possibility. A nice calculation performed while he was buttoning up his leather jacket, promised him that the adventure should be worth no less than a ten-pound note. He had matrimonial ambitions, and he relied upon the house-party at Knowl to furnish at least the kitchen and the best bedroom.

"I can do it, sir," he said, when he was quite awake; "we won't light the lamps until we are in the lane. Is the doctor going back to-night? I suppose not, or they would have sent round before. Sorry to hear Mr. Caird is so bad, sir."

"Yes, but there is no danger yet. I want something from town which will be of the greatest help to him if it comes at once. The doctor is asleep—he is not going back until after breakfast, and then by train. If there is any trouble, say that I ordered the car, and that Mr. Caird wished it."

"That's quite enough for me, sir; I shall be ready as soon as you are. Mind you wrap up well, sir; it will be very cold."

The "bridgers" were playing "just one round of no trumps" when Philip got his fur cloak from his bedroom and crept out of doors to the garage. He had already ascertained that no telegram could be sent at an earlier hour than eight o'clock from any rural post-office in the neighbourhood of the Manor; and it was in his

mind that he would go straight to the General Office in Birmingham and thence despatch his wire direct to the Confidential Inquiry Agency in London. The success of it, he admitted, must depend upon the Spanish woman's acts since she quitted the house. If she had gone straight to Birmingham, and there had caught the night mail to London, all trace of her might be already lost. On the other hand, she might not have done so, postponing her journey until the morning, or even setting out in another direction altogether. Time and day alone could guide him ; he hoped nothing from the haste of panic.

Their journey, despite the sharp cold, was not without its romance. Though there had been heavy mists at sundown, the later night dispelled them, and a clear moon shone in a star-lit heaven, giving the kindlier mantle of a beneficent winter to fields and woods and the wide-spreading valley. Sleep had folded her cloak about the villages, and had hushed them to a pastoral silence. Upon the great high road they passed none but a carter driving into market and a tramp sleeping upon a bed of stones. Their own voices sounded a little odd and eerie at such an hour, and the beat of the engine was like a song of speed raised by murmuring lips. They welcomed it, followed its pulsations while it seemed to say, " Now, now, now," as though each were an effort of will and heart. A sense of might and force accompanied them through the darker turns where the woods closed about them and bare branches stretched out their arms, bidding them pass under. For this hour, at any rate, Philip said he was as one apart from that which men called the world ; but the solemnity of it, the majesty of its heavens and the mystery of its darkness found him nearer to the true

understanding of the infinite than day and men could bring him. Yes, indeed, for this majesty would endure, and the children of the children of Knowl would worship it; and all else would pass but the eternal mystery and the eternal hope which is the children's birthright.

They drove cautiously, nursing the willing car through the dark places and curbing her speed even upon the open road. A village church chimed the hour of four o'clock when the lights of Birmingham first came to their view, and it was half-past four when they drew up at the offices of the General Post in that considerable city. Philip at once despatched his message to the offices of Rawdon, Carr, and Clerk, the inquiry agents by Charing Cross; and when that was done he sent Johnson back to Knowl with a ten-pound note in his pocket. Quentin had already insisted that every penny expended in this strange quest of the woman should be his charge, and he had forced notes for two hundred pounds upon his ambassador. "Whatever else you want my lawyers will supply—here is my authority to draw upon them," had been his parting words. Money at least would be no obstacle, and Philip would make none of it. His purpose was to save the man and the woman. He did not care if it cost Caird half his fortune should success be the purchase. And success hung in the balance now. Waiting in his bedroom at the Grand Hotel, Philip passed the longest hours he had lived through. Would he find Isabella Montanes, or had she escaped him? To this stupendous question the answer came at half-past eleven. It excited him beyond any message he had ever received.

"Your instructions closely followed. Person arrived and traced. Our senior partner will meet you at Euston on receipt of wire."

Philip crumpled the telegram up, then reopened it and tore it into shreds. A quick glance at the time-table showed him a train to London at 11.50. At a quarter to three o'clock he stood upon the platform at Euston in close talk with an apparently benevolent old gentleman who might have passed more readily for a venerable archdeacon than the head of a private inquiry agency. The two men exchanged a brief word and then entered a cab. They ordered the driver to go to Baker Street.

"The lady arrived at ten minutes past ten," the agent began. "My name is Rawdon. I thought it better that I should come. We followed her to Blandford Square, to a lodging-house there. My men are now watching the house."

"I am much obliged by your promptness," Philip said. "The matter is not a very serious one, but this lady may be able to supply me with some very particular information concerning a friend of mine in Paris. She is quite honest, I believe; I know nothing against her and have no quarrel with her."

He contented himself with that; but William Rawdon, of the firm of Rawdon, Carr, and Clerk, was not so easily satisfied. "It's a case of blackmail," he said to himself. "The young Earl is in a mess again, I suppose. Well, it shall be worth something to our house if I can make it so." But aloud he said—

"You have been staying at Knowl Manor with Mr. Quentin Caird, I think?"

"That is so," exclaimed Philip, though the candour of it surprised him.

"Yes, I read your name among the list of guests. It must be a lovely place, sir. I envy you gentlemen who have the leisure for country pursuits. This London is

dreadfully trying—it makes old men of the youngest of us."

"That's true; and yet I suppose you are very fond of London?"

"I would not live out of it for twenty thousand a year."

Philip laughed. He had been wondering whether his action had been wise or foolish. Should he have made a confidant at all, even of such a firm as Rawdon, Carr, and Clerk? He did not know. But he admitted that without extraneous help he would never have traced Isabella Montanes.

"I like all cities," he said; "the country teaches us to go back to them. Let me give you my London address while I think of it. I may want your help again. I shall call upon you after this visit in any case. This is Baker Street, is it not? then I suppose we are not far off."

"The second turning on the right. Will you drive up, or would you sooner walk?"

"Oh, drive, by all means; but it had better be alone, I think."

"Certainly; I will leave you here. Do you wish the house watched when you leave it?"

"That depends. Perhaps one of your men might wait for me.

"I will leave one at the station door. You will find him here whenever you come."

"And will he know me?"

"My dear sir, we know every one."

Philip said no more. The cab stopped and the agent left him. Two minutes later he himself knocked at the door of a shabby house in Blandford Square and asked of a stooping and very dirty crone if a Spanish lady by

the name of Montanes lived there. The old woman shook her head and mouthed a negative between toothless gums.

"No such person here—who is it, do you say?—no, we don't know her."

"Perhaps I am mistaken in the name. You take in lodgers, do you not?"

"Hey, what is it—lodgers? Do you want lodgings? I'll call my darter. I'm a little hard of hearing—eh—no such person in this house."

It was disappointing, but to be expected. No doubt the woman passed under another name. When the "darter" came—a smart young person of the cockney brand, neither servant nor shop-girl nor barmaid, but reminiscent of each—she settled the question in a moment.

"Why, you mean Mrs. Caird," she exclaimed knowingly. "Yes, she's not long been in from Birmingham. Who shall I say wants to see her?"

The reply staggered Philip. He had not expected to find Isabella Montanes under that name, but that she should be living here in London as Quentin Caird's wife astonished him beyond anything he had yet heard.

"She would not know my name. Tell her that I come from Birmingham. She will guess my business—I am here to be of service to her."

The smart "young person" replied with an expressive "Oh!" and when she had looked Philip up and down a little contemptuously, she ran upstairs and remained there for a full five minutes. When she reappeared it was to beckon Philip up.

"She's just had her lunch, but she'll see you," the edict went. "It's the front floor drawing-room. Fancy,

" That Quentin had married her did not surprise him."

both of you come from Birmingham and not met! Well, strange things do happen."

Philip admitted that they did, and entered the drawing-room without further parley. A man of considerable powers of self-control, he would not admit that the doubt and suspense of it all had quickened his pulse and sorely tried his nerves. But such was the truth, and the sleepless night helped it. Nearly four years had passed since he last saw Isabella Montanes in Paris. To-day, as then, he could admit that she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever looked upon. That Quentin had married her did not surprise him. In the same breath he pitied Alice, and said that he stood upon the threshold of tragedy.

Isabella had changed her maid's gown for a loose wrapper, in colour a very subtle shade of green, and ornamented with a belt of spangled gold at the waist. Her black hair, raven's locks of superb abundance, was coiled and caught up by a jewelled pin. She wore coloured slippers with sham diamond buckles, a ring keeping her wedding ring boasted an emerald of considerable size; her movements, quick and agile and serpentine, flashed other gems with vanity displayed on all occasions possible and impossible. The room itself might have been the "first front" drawing-room of any decent lodging-house in London. A terrible lion framed in black snorted at Philip from the wall above the chiffonnier. The chairs were "tapestry." Mars in alabaster leered at Venus, also in alabaster, from a cabined and confined pedestal beneath a glass shade.

Isabella was half lying upon the well-worn sofa when Philip entered. Between her jewelled fingers she held the stump of a cigarette. Her lips were parted in a

smile which was not unpleasant; he would not have called her an adventuress, nor did he think her that.

"Mr. Philip Rose," she said, smiling; "oh, yes, I know you—we have been my husband's guests together. Pray take a chair; I know you very well."

She pulled a chair near the sofa, and he sat down willingly. Her accent was agreeable, and she interspersed her conversation with little scraps of French and Spanish, and occasionally an American idiom, which came very naturally to her. Philip could not say why he felt so much at home with her. He had expected to be shocked, disgusted, repelled. But none of these consequences attended her welcome. She put him quite at his ease.

"Let us see," he said, going straight to the point, "I last saw you at the Circus in Paris. I shall never forget it if I live for a hundred years."

"*Moi non plus*," she exclaimed, and the sudden pallor of her face was unmistakable; "down, down, down! Ah, yes, I dream of it every night—down, down, down—and then nothing, nothing for days and weeks. Please do not talk of it—it makes me ill."

She recovered her self-composure, and stretched out her hand for the cigarettes upon the table.

"You smoke, what? Try them—they are not so worse. That is what they say in America—not so worse; is it not droll? Wait, and I will light for you—now, like that—so, and we can talk if you will; but without tobacco, *jamais, jamais*."

Philip permitted her to light his cigarette, and then settled himself in the low armchair.

"You went to Knowl as Lady Leverton's maid—why did you do that, Mrs. Caird?" he began with all the

caution of a counsel for the prosecution. Her reply was characteristic:

"I, *sabe Dios*, I went because I wished to go. How should I go otherwise unless I say 'All this is mine. I have but to speak, give it to me—I am your wife.' I do not say it, certain, because I am what the nigger call a white man. I go to Knowl to see and hear for myself. *Je 'mamuse, vous savez*—I see the man who was good to me—yes, years, so many years ago. Why should I make him unhappy? The other woman is doing that. If he had only eyes to see what I have seen. But he will learn some day—and then, my friend, then there will be the play."

Philip did not know what to say to her. The frankness of it all disarmed him. She knew her rights, she understood that a word of hers spoken aloud could claim Knowl, and yet she held her peace for the sake of a comrade of the old time. Generosity could hardly go further; prudence, however, whispered that there were reservations, and that such generosity would be qualified later on. Philip was by no means ready to say, "What an angel!"

"The reason is the best you could give me," he rejoined. "Permit me to say that I find it a very noble reason. Of course, you have known for some time that you had these rights?"

She perceived that he was cross-examining her, and an ugly look in the jet-black eyes warned him to go warily. Isabella Montanes was no child to simper confidences to a curious nurse. She did not fear interrogation.

"Why should I know? I was at Buenos Ayres with my friends. Mr. Caird is a rich gentleman, but are there not others? Do you suppose all the world

talks of him? I knew nothing until I saw him in Paris —that would be *mois de Mai;* was he not in Paris then, with Madame, *hein?* You know that he was."

"My dear lady, I know everything—even of the death certificates which were forwarded to my friend by your friends in France."

She looked at him for an instant with astonishment written in her amused eyes; then her manner changed, and she suppressed a laugh which was almost a titter.

"*Allez, c'est une bêtise,*" she exclaimed; "cannot you imagine that a woman may have—do you not say—her reasons? He did not want me and I did not want him. Well, I went to Buenos Ayres, but I did not wish to go as Esmeralda, the dancer. You understand that monsieur—La belle Esmeralda wished to die. So! Her friends say she is dead. They are droll; they get the papers and they send them to England. At Monte Video I am another. Why not, if I wish to be?"

"No doubt you had the best of reasons. We need not go into them, I think."

She laughed aloud this time.

"But we will go into them, if you please. Ah, I know what you think. You are saying that she has not been a good woman, and that the judge will divorce her. Ah, if it had been that, would she have told you her story? Oh, you are not as clever as you look, not at all, Mr. Philip Rose; you are not as clever as my little finger. Please to ask me some more questions; really it is sad to see you so unhappy."

Philip's crestfallen look was truly a study. He had been imagining just what she said; and her rebuke shamed him to the unspoken confession of the truth. Clearly this beautiful woman must remain an enigma.

He felt like a child in her hands. Frankness could be his only weapon.

"I have no desire to ask you questions at all; I have come here from your husband to make you an offer."

"Of marriage, monsieur?"

He laughed with her, and lost the thread of his argument as he did so. She, however, took it up for him, and continued in such a tone of banter that he began to believe his mission already hopeless and a failure.

"You come from my husband—then, why did he not come himself? Is he afraid of me? Am I a bogey? Why does he send strangers to me? Let him come here himself and I will listen. It is an insult to send you—now, is it not, Mr. Rose; is it not an insult?"

"In no way—since your husband is lying in his bed at Knowl with a broken leg."

The smile left her face, and the hand which was about to put the cigarette to her lips remained still. Her gaze was intent and searching. She did not believe him.

"Honest Indian?" she asked.

Philip nodded angrily. The expression seemed so childish and offensive.

"You should know something about it since it was you who frightened his horse."

She shook her head slowly.

"I passed some one upon the road; I did not see his face; the horse galloped away. I am very, very sorry. I should not have gone there—but then, I am mad sometimes, Mr. Rose; every woman is that—you know it if you know women. My poor friend—you have made me very unhappy."

Her sorrow could not be misunderstood. She had

quick sympathies, and any tale of misfortune awakened them. Philip decided to profit by the turn. He hoped much of it, and pleaded with her almost humbly.

"The doctors do not frighten us—it will mean no more than a month in bed. He must be kept very quiet and he must not worry. There's the trouble—he must not worry. You can help us in that, Mrs. Caird; you are the only person in England to-day who can do so. Now, will you, for the sake of the old time, will you help a man who will do anything in the world for you?"

"Will I help him? But what have I to do with it?"

"You have everything to do with it. When he married for the second time he believed you dead. His whole happiness depends upon your frank acceptance of the present position. You can disturb it, of course; you have only to assert your claims and the law will support them. If you do that, you may possibly win some profit for yourself. But, believe me, that your profit will be far greater if you agree not to assert them. Have I made myself quite plain? I think so, for a clever woman dislikes too many words. You, on your part, agree to leave England, to live abroad and not to visit this country. Your husband, upon his side, will make you an allowance of two thousand pounds a year—there is the bargain. Say 'Yes,' and you shall have the first year's allowance within an hour."

Isabella did not immediately reply to an offer made so frankly and with so little reserve. Money had never meant much to her. She was a child of the sun and the olives, and the ambition of her life was to return to Spain and there dream out lazy days until the end of time. Moreover, she was in her way an honest woman. It had never occurred to her, save in moments of

passion, to profit by her brief intercourse with Quentin Caird. Their marriage she had regarded from the first as a jest, perpetrated by children and of no account. She did not think that it would be valid in a western country. When, therefore, a stranger came to her with this story of wrecked lives and ruined homes her first impulse was to laugh, her second to promise what he wished. That the latter alternative was not immediately acted upon must be set down to her pride. Let Quentin ask her so much himself when he was well. She had no mind to deal with an emissary.

"You do not flatter me, Mr. Philip Rose," she said, after a considerable pause; and then almost in a tone of raillery, "Oh, you men, how clever you think yourselves when you deal with us women! We are all so many adventuresses, *hein*, is not it so? We are to be bought and sold like the pretty little singing birds in the cages. And when you tire of us you open the door and ask us to fly away. If we do not you call us horrid names, or you tempt us by your money. The song has tired you—you know it so well. You have wearied of your little yellow bird and would like a black one. No, do not contradict me—I am speaking the truth. My husband is afraid of me; I will not leave the cage. *Mais oui*, I am to be lured away by the—the other duck that is made of gold and silver. *Finissez donc*—I shall not go, not for you, Mr. Rose. It will be time to think of it when my husband asks me."

She sank back upon the cushions and struck a match angrily. Philip would not admit that he had made a mistake; but he leaped instantly to the conclusion that she was a very unordinary woman, and must be dealt with by unordinary methods. The offer of money had been clumsily made, perhaps; it was a difficult offer

to make under any circumstances. He had done his best upon a wrong road; it remained to retrace his steps.

"My dear lady," he said, "you misrepresent us entirely. The case is quite simple. You have claims upon Mr. Caird's wealth; he has none upon your generosity. I ask you to help him if you will for old time's sake. The rest is a mere matter of justice, and I will leave your husband to speak of it himself. It will be quite sufficient if you permit me to go back and tell him that he has nothing to fear—that you do not intend to make any public claim—certainly not to do anything which would make him unhappy. If I may say that, I shall feel that I have succeeded."

He waited more anxiously than he would have admitted for her reply. That curiously perplexing droop at the corners of her mouth, the pursed-up crimson lips and the smiling eyes told him nothing either of good or ill. He entirely failed to understand her both then and afterwards. Perchance he thought her rather eccentric than wilfully obstinate; she was unlike any other woman he had ever known.

"Say it if you will," she exclaimed, almost with indifference. "When my husband is well he shall come and see me. Understand, I insist upon that. He shall come and see me here in London, and I will tell him what he will be glad to hear. Certainly I wish his happiness; but, my friend, he will not be happy with that woman. Have I not seen her for myself? She has no soul—she is the little glacier at home—she freezes. Oh, I hate her already — she speaks to her servants so unfeelingly. I heard her—oh, yes. I heard it all, and I have written to her my little letter. She will not laugh when she reads that; she will hear the truth for the first time in all her pretty little life!"

Philip's face was a study while she made this amazing confession. He had risen from his chair almost at the first word of it, and he could hardly control his voice when he cried—

"You have written to her—to Lady Alice? Good God, not under your own name, I hope! Did you post it to-day?"

She broke the ash from her cigarette and answered nonchalantly—

"I posted it an hour before you came. Why should I not write under my own name? What is my name to her that she should trouble about it?"

"It is everything—she knows your story, knows of her husband's marriage; she believes you to be dead."

La belle Esmeralda looked at him blankly for an instant. Then she threw herself back upon the sofa and laughed until the tears came into her eyes.

"*Vraiment, mon ami*," she cried, "but my husband is a fool after all."

It was such an astounding moment; so utterly unlooked for and bewildering that Philip forgot every other purpose that his mind might concentrate on this.

At any hazard he must prevent the letter coming into Alice's hands.

"I will give your message to Mr. Caird," he said curtly. "No doubt you will hear from him in due course. I will tell him that you are to be found at this house—is that correct?"

"Perhaps, perhaps," she replied indolently. "Who knows? God knows! Goodbye, Mr. Rose. You are not a clever ambassador, but I forgive you."

She did not stir from the sofa. He touched her hand with hot fingers, and quitted the house like a man who had played for a great prize and has lost all at the hazard.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BENEVOLENT OLD GENTLEMAN

THE benevolent old gentleman of the firm of Rawdon, Carr, and Clerk waited for his client upon the kerbstone by Baker Street Station. Apparently he had not moved from the spot since Philip quitted him, and here he was smoking a long cigar and reading his daily paper just as though the whole business of life were to watch humanity amiably and to smile upon it with uneclectic kindness. When he perceived Philip crossing the street, and observed the hard, set expression on his face and the nervous glance of his eye, Benjamin Rawdon figuratively slapped the chest of his cupidity and promised himself an interesting case. "My lord of Alcester," he said to himself, "has been playing the fool again. Ha, ha, blessed youth! What would women and the lawyers do without you?" Upon which benevolent sentiment he folded his paper neatly and touched Philip upon the arm.

"I thought I would wait myself," he began, without apology. "A professional instinct told me that you would want to see me—shall we drive or are you walking a little way?"

Philip debated it for a moment. Should he make a confidant of this man or should he not? His natural

habits of reserve helped him to decide the question in the negative. For a moment silence—or, at the worst, but the briefest outline of a case.

"Where is the nearest telegraph office?" he asked, coming to a resolution quickly. "I must send a wire to the north before doing anything else. We can talk as we go."

Benjamin Rawdon said "Certainly." There was a telegraph office in Dorset Street. They crossed the road again and retraced their steps, and as they went the old gentleman coughed a delicate preliminary to his question—

"Quite satisfactory, Mr. Rose?"

"Exceedingly unsatisfactory," replied Philip in a huff.

Benjamin Rawdon shook his head.

"Forgive me," he said very solemnly, "I feared it would be so."

"You feared it—feared what?"

"Finality, sir. That class of woman allows her rapacity leisure. A Spaniard, you say; she will tell you exactly how much she will take 'to-morrow.'"

Philip turned round upon him a little fiercely.

"You know something about her? Why did you not tell me at first?"

The benevolent old gentleman smiled.

"You did not ask me," he said suavely.

"Then I ask you now. Is she notorious?"

"My dear Mr. Rose, I have been thirty years in practice, and I tell you that every woman is notorious to somebody. If you want this lady's history, give me a week and I will tell it you."

"Ah, you are merely guessing it, I see."

"The guess of a man who is always guessing. I'll put it to you. A Spanish woman, who has been con-

nected with the theatre, living alone in lodgings. Not a very young woman, but one of considerable personal attractions. She comes from the country, and certain people are interested in her movements. When I begin with a story like that, I generally know how to go on, believe me."

Philip said nothing. It came to him as a deplorable truth that Isabella was living in Blandford Square under her husband's name. This ancient leech, who had crossed his path at his own invitation, would certainly follow the matter up unless he were at once satisfied that nothing was to be got. Upon the other hand, a less honourable suggestion forced itself upon his inclinations. If Quentin's wife had a past, that past might destroy her claim upon Knowl. What easier than to say, "Go on with it, find out everything, spy upon the woman night and day." From this, however, his better sense of fair play revolted. He had met Isabella face to face, and made her a proposition of a kind. If she accepted it, well and good; he would be the last to deal doubly with her.

"Frankly, Mr. Rawdon," he exclaimed, after a moment's thought, "this woman's past is nothing whatever to do with me or my friends. It might be —I cannot say. For the moment I am not interested in it. If I want help I will come to you first of all. Be assured of that. Here is the telegraph office, I see. Wait for me while I send a wire; we can settle the rest on the way to the station."

He acted impulsively upon the words, and left Benjamin Rawdon at the door of the office. It was really wonderful to see the activity that benevolent old gentleman displayed so soon as his client had quitted him. With a hop and a skip he returned to the corner

by Baker Street, beckoned some one from a shop front there, and despatched his man instantly to Blandford Square.

"Don't leave the house—find out all you can. It's worth money; no loitering, mind. If the woman goes to Paris, follow her. She's not to be lost whatever it costs."

The emissary, a faultless customer in a smart frock coat, did not lose an instant in obeying these instructions. He was across the road and out of sight like a shot, while Benjamin Rawdon made no less haste in returning to the corner of the post office. When Philip came out that benevolent old gentleman was skimming the political news of the hour. He might have stood to an artist for a figure of placidity.

"Ah," he said, "you have been very quick. Now, what do you say to a glass of wine somewhere?"

"I say, Thanks, but impossible. I am returning north by the first train."

"There is an excellent dining train at five thirty-five. You lunched coming up, I suppose?"

"No, my lunch waits until to-morrow."

Benjamin Rawdon made a note of this. He went without his lunch—a man is in a hurry who does that.

"A bad practice," he said aloud. "If you are going by the five thirty-five there is plenty of time."

"Thank you, I must make some calls first. You have my card. I will arrange an appointment if there is anything further."

He beckoned a hansom, and gave the driver the direction to go to Portland Place. Benjamin Rawdon smiled as he heard it.

"He is going by the four-thirty, and he is in a devil of a hurry," was the amiable reflection.

It was a very true one. Philip had determined not to lose an hour in returning to Knowl. All might depend upon it; his friend's life, the happiness of a woman he wished to be happy. For Isabella's letter, were it delivered at the Manor, would be final and unanswerable. Philip had already wired to Percival, the Earl, to withhold that letter and to keep it until they met. And now he raced for its possession as a man toward a goal which must decide an issue of life or death.

CHAPTER XIX

SUSPENSE

THE Poet Hood has ascribed a fine treasure of negatives to bleak November, though that much-maligned month has many friends nowadays. "No park, no ring, no afternoon gentility," may have been true of London at the zenith of the Victorian commonplace; but our own day has seen a "winter season" which belies the merry bard; and there is no month of the year when we remember with such cordiality the owner of a considerable shoot or so quickly respond to the "week-end" invitation. Then is the time when "passing through" town has some of the charms known to the great people in their incognito. "No carriage, no dinners, no dresses," would be a truer account of it. We do what we like, dress as we please, live in restaurants, see the plays we overlooked in June—are, in fact, in some way visitors to the capital who are not ashamed to make the best use of our holidays. If the fogs be kind we shall pass unrecognised when recognition might be awkward. And in any case, even though our visit be for a month, we are only "passing through."

There is another aspect of November, and it is one which appeals with a somewhat plaintive call to a mind which responds willingly to its pleasing melancholy.

The mellow year hastening to its close is attended oftentimes by many satellites which usher it to rest. Gold-red skies and russet heaths, fine distances across the valleys, a full ripeness of the air and the nip of nature's morning possess in bleak November a subtlety which at once invigorates the mind and attunes it to reflection. We are, perhaps, more alive in this month than in any other. Decadence depresses us, but the promise of winter is unfailingly inspiriting. Even the majesty of storm is the necessary contrast to the warmth of home and the victory of the fireside. In March we draw the nightly curtains sadly, but in November with pleasure. Nor do we forget that even in drear November the children's feast will carry us quickly to the New Year and the reawakening of hope and effort.

It had been a typical November day when Philip left London, with a hazy sun silvering a misty sky and the deeper shades of red upon leaf and tree and the borderland of common. As the train emerged from the City and sped by Willesden, a clear night showed a brighter heaven and promised a spell of frost; but this promise failed to become performance as the hours went by, and when they stopped at Rugby a shrill wind howled about the carriage and flakes of snow melted upon the window panes. It was here that a smart young sailor, just returned from an Australian station, ventured the opinion that they were in for a blizzard; to which a loquacious parson responded that he never liked winds, for they seemed to speak of uneasy consciences. As no one contradicted him, or seemed to care very much for a duologue upon sin and the elements, the cleric brightened up considerably, and reminded them that dinner would be served in the restaurant car at once, a fact which was received with better applause. Philip,

indeed, had eaten little since ten o'clock that morning, and he went in to dinner at this unaccustomed hour very willingly. Whatever was happening at Knowl, fasting, assuredly, would help no one; and if his mission had been a failure, he knew that nothing he could now do would make it a success. Certainly he would have been the better pleased had he caught the four-thirty train and not the five thirty-five; but he argued rightly that all depended upon the young Earl's sagacity, and that if the fatal letter were not arrested it mattered little at what time he or any one else reached Knowl. For in that case Alice must know all, and the rest must be between her husband and herself.

Her husband! Yes, the words began to ring oddly when he repeated them. Whatever else might come, he could doubt no longer the nature of the wrong which had been inflicted by amazing fortune upon one of the brightest and the proudest women he had ever known. She was not, she never had been Quentin Caird's wife. Hush it up as they might, buy silence at any cost, rid themselves of Isabella Montanes and contrive her compliance, none of these things would better Alice's position or alter the reality of it. Nor was Philip by any means sure that the course he had so glibly proposed to Quentin could be justified even in the light of the greater good. If Alice were not a wife in the sight of God and man, Quentin had no right to keep that knowledge from her for a single day. Dower her, of course he would, place his great fortune at her disposition; but his claim must begin and end there, that another claim might make itself heard. So clear-headed a man as Philip Rose did not disguise it from himself that Isabella had a full and just title to her husband's protection until it were proved that she had forfeited it. When he

asked himself who would prove it, friendship answered "You will," while a subtler voice whispered that he would do nothing if Alice were free. So early he came to the cross roads of which one might lead to solitude and the other through pity to a woman's heart.

Philip knew that he would be greatly tempted, but he determined to face temptation resolutely. His greater, more immediate concern, was the view the world would take of this proud girl's position. Would it estrange her utterly or temper the slander by justice? Many, it might be, would rejoice at her fall: the self-seekers she had slighted, the envious on the lower rung of the ladder; the needy who had begged of her; the friends to whom she had lent a helping hand. That such as these should be merciful it were libelling human nature to assume; nevertheless, Philip could see that this was a case unlike any he had known or read of; not for the fact that a marriage was null and void, had never been a marriage at all, in short; but from the position and the wealth of those upon whom the blow must fall. The Lady Alice Caird indisputably stood foremost among the smart women of the day; her husband was one of the richest men in the world. Royalty itself had been her guest; there was no person of great distinction she had not entertained at one of her houses. And now it must go out that she was neither maid nor wife, and that the man who had dowered her with gifts had sinned against her more greatly than any of her enemies. Such would be the result of the Spaniard's letter—if not of that, then of discovery when chance should draw the curtain aside and the truth should be revealed.

With these thoughts in his head, it is to be imagined that Philip paid little heed to the conversation of the loquacious parson or to that of the merry sailor who sat

in the dining-car with him. The blackness of the night and the storm of wind which gathered force as they approached Birmingham, were well in keeping with his own agitated and restless mood and the depression which attended it. The desire to know possessed him as a mania. For good or ill he must hear the news which Knowl had to tell him; and he was out of the train like a shot at Birmingham, where an astonished porter heard and understood him with difficulty. These Londoners truly spoke a strange tongue.

"You be going on to Knowl—then you'll have to take a fly and drive, sir."

"To take a fly and drive—nonsense, the local train goes on."

"Ay, she do ordinary, but her's not going to-night. There be a tree on the road—a fine sight of wind and wet we have had, sir, and the line's blocked. You'd do better at an hotel, sir——"

Philip was not given to the vicious habit of bad language, but he swore under his breath and turned to one of the superintendents who had overheard their talk.

"He says that I cannot get on to Knowl by train—is that so?"

"Perfectly correct, sir—there's a block on the line. I cannot tell you when it will be free."

"Oh, come! Have you had a gale, then?"

"A dreadful gale, sir. I don't remember nothing like it. My hat's been half-way to Coventry more than once this afternoon. You'll do better in Birmingham, sir."

"Thank you, but I think not. Where is the telegraph office? I can send a wire, I suppose?"

"You'll be clever if you can, sir—the line's been down since five o'clock."

Philip breathed again. He had sent his telegram from London at a few minutes after four. It could not fail to have reached Knowl, he thought.

"Well, I shall take your advice. There is nothing to do in Birmingham, I suppose, even on a night like this?"

The superintendent, a great believer in the supremacy of the fine town of Birmingham over all the cities of the world, stared at his questioner in blank astonishment.

"I think you might amuse yourself," he said loftily. "Why, London takes her plays from us now, and glad to get them. We haven't got Mr. Joseph Chamberlain for nothing, sir. If you're fond of music-halls——"

"Thank you, I see that I shan't be bored—if this pessimist will put my bag on a cab it will be a good start."

The porter was not quite sure whether "pessimist" might not be considered an insulting expression, and as his own language, as the lady said of the cabman's, was far from being anæmic, he struggled between the rival temptations of a shilling and a repartee, in which the shilling gained an easy victory. Philip went on to the Grand Hotel and thence to a music-hall. Here he saw a woman upon a trapeze, and somehow he recalled very vividly that night in Paris when "La Esmeralda's" star apparently had set for ever and every man in that great theatre believed her to be dead. He had spoken of the husband in the shadows then. How little any of us know of those chains of circumstance which wait to bind us in the unsuspecting hour.

To-morrow the shadows would pass and he must meet the husband of La Esmeralda face to face. What news would then be for him? Good God! he cried, what torture is there like the torture of suspense?

CHAPTER XX

THE SUMMONS

PHILIP arrived at Knowl Station a little after eleven o'clock upon the following morning. Calm had followed the storm of yesterday and a warm sun sucked up the shining drops from a sodden landscape. He had telegraphed news of his coming, and Johnson, the smart chauffeur, who wondered if there would be any more notes to his hand, waited for him at the pretty country station. Such news as the Manor House had to tell he learned in a few words. Hounds met to-day at Pearman's Spinney—yes, Mr. Caird was going on nicely, but her ladyship was unwell and would not ride. She had been too much in the sick-room, no doubt. It had been a bad night, a fearful night—no one remembered anything like it—they never do in the matter of storms. The letters were sent up early this morning with the telegrams. Nothing could be delivered yesterday; you couldn't stand upright—and so on, and so on—while aprons were tucked about cold knees and the willing motor ticked away like a silent clock. Philip did not say "Thank God" when he heard that the telegrams and the letters came together—he felt by no means sure that all had gone well, and the news of Alice's indisposition he found disquieting.

Nor would he, at this point, speculate further upon eventuality. A quarter of an hour must make him master of the truth, and, for that matter, they had not gone a mile upon the road when he overtook no other than Sir Percival himself jogging to the Meet upon a quiet cob. The two met with mutual exclamations of pleasure. They had so much to talk about.

"What is it, Philip—what the deuce do you mean by that telegram?"

"I'll tell you in two words," said Philip as he got out of the car and walked by Percival's side. And then he asked the all-important question—

"Did you do what I told you to—did you keep the letter back?"

"How could I? We were bridging last night until two o'clock. If Beetles hadn't pulled me out of bed by the leg this morning, I'd still be dreaming of fairies. Ask him yourself. He's over there holding on to Black Bess's mane. I never saw such an idiot on a horse in life."

"Then Alice received her letters this morning?"

"Of course she did. What's up, Philip; what's going on, that you are playing Gaboriau? I didn't tell any one, but I thought a lot, like the ancient parrot. What are you messing about with my sister's letters for?"

The interrogation assumed almost an offensive aspect. Percival, with his dull, dogged wit, possessed nevertheless a certain cunning which, added to an hereditary sense of honour, made him suspect and distrust the honesty of the telegram he had received. He could believe at the first guess that all was not well between Alice and Philip. Not a disciple of morality, an instinct of preservation urged him to forbid any intrigue of this

kind. Why, if Alice quarrelled with his brother-in-law, where would his own income be? In truth he became quite a lofty patron of the commandments, though he had long since forgotten how many of them there were. Fortunately, no one understood him better than Philip, who kept his temper as he always did, and responded at once to the subtle accusation.

"I am trying to keep your sister from the knowledge of a very great misfortune," he said. "You will know soon enough what it is. If you had kept her letters until I came, something might have been done as much in your interests as hers. As it is, we are out of luck. It may be that it is better so—I cannot say until I have seen her."

The quiet manner, the hint of misfortune particularly, frightened the young Earl as he had not been frightened for many a long day. As in a flash he saw Quentin's annual cheque for a thousand dishonoured. Unlimited possibilities of pauperism presented themselves to him in gloomy lights. Why, he might even be compelled to earn his own living—a degree of shame which his unkindest imagination had not touched.

"Good Lord!" he cried. "Quentin hasn't been quarrelling with her, has he? I thought they hadn't hit it very well just lately. Why can't she humour him?—she's clever enough. Some women don't know when they're well off—that's a fact. Well, I wish I were in her shoes; I'd have a good time somehow. You don't think it's serious, do you, Philip?"

"I shall know when I get up to the house. That's why I asked you to help me."

"Then if I'd bagged the letter it would have been all right? Good Lord, what an ass I am! I'll get up at nine to-morrow—by George I will!"

"My dear Percival, it will not matter a straw what time you get up to-morrow, believe me. Now go on to the hounds. If I can save your day I will. But I'm very doubtful, and that's the truth."

The Earl left him reluctantly, muttering idle and somewhat vulgar reproaches upon his own tardiness. A little later, however, Philip saw him by the side of his Cambridge friend, "Beetles," and the pair were evidently enjoying a hearty laugh. "Such a fellow would hold a flower-show on his grandfather's grave," Philip said; and the reflection came to him that the tragedies and the comedies of an individual life are very individual after all, and leave scarce a ripple upon the pool of humanity, however fiercely the gale may rage in any one human heart. Here to-day at Knowl, the labourer trod the lonely furrow, smoke rose from the homely cottages as it rose yesterday, and would rise to-morrow, the farmer jogged placidly to market, and yonder over the valley the "pinks" were ambling after the patient hounds. Whose pleasure of all these would be abated one jot or tittle because a woman suffered at the Manor House? Touch their pockets and lamentations go up to heaven; but say, "Give pity unselfishly," and they draw aside to tell you that the punishment is deserved, the pinion self-made which impelled the steel. No, Alice's fall would leave these untouched. Few, perchance, would remember her existence a year after she had gone from among them.

He found a deserted house when he arrived at the Manor, and servants who yawned in the reaction of welcome idleness. Her ladyship, they said, had not left her room that morning—Mr. Caird was better, and the doctor had been with him. Philip warmed himself for a moment by the great fire in the inner hall, and then

determined to see Quentin at once. After all, it was possible that Isabella had wilfully exaggerated her letter, and that the whole of the truth could not be found in it. Philip wondered that he had taken so gloomy a view of it, and although the silent house seemed full of dismal omens, and the figure of tragedy stalked his footsteps everywhere, he went upstairs in better spirits and was glad that he should stand with his friend in this evil hour. Just for one instant he paused at the door of Quentin's room and listened a little furtively. Then he knocked, and a strong voice answered, "Come in, Philip—is that you, old man?"

"No other, my dear Quentin, and very pleased to get here. Why, you look a new man. What have they been doing to you, then?"

"Letting me rest, Philip. After all, rest is the best doctor."

"For a man with a broken leg, certainly. We must have a good chat. I suppose it isn't forbidden, nurse?"

The nurse by no means forbade it. That hour of the morning had come when her "little lunch" bell rang pleasantly in the ears of her imagination. She left them at once, shutting the door carefully, and actually disdaining to listen. When she had gone, Philip drew a chair to the bedside and examined Quentin's face more closely. His friend had suffered much undoubtedly; but there was a greater calm in the eyes than there had been two days ago. His talk, too, was less excited, and Philip did not fail to notice that he crushed a telegram in his left hand. Desiring to brighten the hours of his captivity, they had drawn the bed into the alcove of the window, and herefrom the patient could see the home park and the pleasant valley, beyond which the Lickey Hills stood up to

show the more beautiful tints of dying autumn. It was all very typical of peace and rest, Philip thought, and yet how ironically so. For his part, he would have felt more at his ease in a London hotel. They could have been acting, acting, acting then. This monstrous prison of a house seemed like a great cage—or better the shallow stage of a theatre whereon the players cannot escape each other.

Quentin was the first to speak when they were alone, and he accompanied his words with an expressive gesture which tossed the telegram into Philip's lap.

"Read that," he said, and asked, "Is it news to you?"

The telegram had been sent from London at nine o'clock that morning. It was signed "Isabella." A brief message seemed characteristic of the sender. "Leaving England—old friendship wishes you good luck." That was all. So childishly naïve Philip thought it, that if it had not been for the letter he would have laughed outright.

"Yes, it's news," he said slowly. "I saw her yesterday, as you may imagine. She did not speak of leaving England then. It must be a second thought."

"It would be. She was always a creature of impulses. Good God, Philip, what a dream it all seems! I feel incapable even of thinking about it."

"If that telegram is true, there is no need to think about it—at present, at any rate. Don't you see that the only person who has a claim upon you in this matter is Alice. She must be first thought of. I say without qualification that I would never open my lips on this subject if I lived for a thousand years. Why should you? If there is any justice to be done on the other side, let the woman ask it. She doesn't do so, evidently—then she knows as well as we that she has

no claim. Why, your very marriage to her may not have been valid—how do you know that it is? It was in America, a civil marriage, I suppose, and you were not an American subject. I should like the lawyers' opinion before I admitted anything about it. Ten to one it isn't binding in this country at all."

Quentin rested his head deep upon the pillow and appeared to be thinking very earnestly. All this had occurred to him also. If he had been less a sentimentalist where women are concerned, his road would have been plainer. The idea of repudiation did not present itself to him favourably. He regarded it in some sense as a question of personal honour.

"We were married over yonder in a public office," he responded at length. "Such a marriage should bind a man of honour all the world over. I cannot follow you in that, Philip. It is much more to the point that Isabella has no claim to make upon me. And yet, my God! what a nightmare for a man to live through, always, always, Philip, day and night, with the woman he loves and is sinning against every hour that he remains with her. Is there any code among men that would justify that? I can't think there is. My duty seems plain—Alice must know, the decision must be hers. Morally, she is my dear wife. She may wish to fight the battle with me, and to say, 'Let it continue.' If she does, there is an end of everything. I can provide for Isabella and send her back to America—she may have her own life to live. No woman of her race is likely to live alone. She will have friends, entanglements—God knows. If I inquired into her past I might be free enough. But I shall not do that unless she compels me—I shall take no initiative, Philip, for I believe it would be a coward's part."

"That is well spoken," Philip admitted. "If ever there was a case when a man is right simply to wait, yours is the case. Let time tell us what to do. If—and there is another 'if,' Quentin—if circumstances are less kind than they seem, then make up your mind to do the best an honest man can do. The rest is in other hands. You, at least, are not the master of it."

He went on to tell him of his eventful hours in London yesterday, of his meeting with Isabella, and her frank talk. Of the letter, the dreadful letter, however, he did not speak; and he was in the act of describing his broken journey and the great gale which had kept him in Birmingham that night when the nurse knocked sharply at the door and entered the room without waiting for an invitation.

"Her ladyship has just heard of your return, sir, and is very anxious to see you immediately," the woman began. Philip rose at once; he guessed why Alice wished to see him.

"She knows," he said, "and God help them both."

But Quentin let him go without a word.

"Yes, please go," he exclaimed, "and do tell her that there is no cause to make a fuss. I'm sick of all these quacks, Philip. I want to be alone."

Philip did not reply. He was telling himself that Fortune would be very kind to Quentin if she did not leave him very much alone for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ADVOCATE

MORE than one room at Knowl Manor went by the name of the "boudoir," but Alice's own sanctum in the southern wing was distinguished as the "white boudoir," and justly considered the most truly feminine apartment in all the house. Here the "period" was that of Louis Quinze, so greatly abused by suburban impostors, and nowhere in the country had such pains been taken to avoid a jarring note or to exclude the merely meretricious. Quentin himself had scoured Paris for the Beauvais tapestry and the superb Sèvres ornaments which were the foundation of the scheme. No dealer in the West End who acquired an eighteenth-century masterpiece of a piquant kind did not first offer it as the very thing for the "white boudoir." Cloisonné and bronze, the Oriental and the purely French deftly blended, were among the most priceless ornaments, while Watteau above other painters added his bewitching colours to the walls. There was a time when Alice used to say that comfort and Louis Quinze declined to meet; but she had recanted her opinion after her first winter at Knowl, and there could not be found a cosier "den" in Shropshire than the one in which so many of her idle hours were spent. Here on

this November day a vast fire of clean logs burned cheerily in an open grate, while for contrast there were chrysanthemums everywhere, and tall arum lilies, and upon the formal tapestried couches such vast piles of cushions that sleep might have been the goddess rather than activity. The mistress of the room herself stood by the deep French windows looking down to the Italian garden and the orchard beyond it. Her writing table, with its high, graceful mountings, and pretty clock rising under a canopy at the back, bore witness to her recent occupation, and the letters she had been writing. But she was in a reverie when Philip entered, and she did not hear him until he spoke to her.

"And how is her ladyship this morning, and why is she not at Pearman's Spinney? I looked everywhere for you on the road, Alice; you really mustn't let——"

She turned abruptly, and observing the deadly pallor of her young face and the black rings beneath her hollow eyes, he stopped as though she had accused him of a blasphemy. How she must have suffered was his first thought. And, of course, she knew. No longer need he speculate with the doubt. The letter had reached her, and she had learned all from it.

"Philip," she said, with amazing calm, "you know why I was not at Pearman's Spinney. No, no, please, we are such old friends, Philip, do not let us begin with a lie. I sent for you because it is right that you should come to me. Let us go where we can talk—here by the fire. I am so cold, Philip—my limbs are as heavy as lead. Oh, dear God, if it were only true. But, of course, a woman has no right to be ill when she is young and happy, Philip."

There is nothing quite so pitiable on earth as the suffering of a woman we love, and are incapable of

"And did you also know that his first wife was alive?"

helping. Philip would have given all he possessed at that moment to be able to bring colour to this white, despairing face, but his helplessness could suggest nothing better than silence until her words should tell him more. From one point of view the very calmness of her manner frightened him. Save for the momentary outburst, instantly suppressed, she acted with a dignity and restraint which only an intense mastery of will could impose upon her. Had she broken down before him, Philip would have known what to do. As it was, he could but say in his heart, God help her.

She led him to the fireside and seated herself upon a heap of cushions piled before the high fender. Her morning robe of blue cloth and white lace showed her bare shapely arms and the rounded limbs upon which her elbows rested. The smallest, prettiest feet that ever were thrust into fur-lined slippers played restlessly with the Persian rug as though feeling for something hidden in the heart of its flowers. The sunshine casting a beam far into the room struck upon her childish face as though in mockery. She seemed little more than a schoolgirl; her sorrow was too young to have aged her.

"Philip," she said, looking into the fire while she spoke, "do you know that I am Quentin's second wife—has he ever told you that?"

"Yes, Alice, I knew it very shortly after you were married."

"And did you also know that his first wife was alive when he married me?"

"I knew it as little as he did."

"But you knew that this woman came to Knowl; you knew that she was hiding in the house, Philip. You saw her, and you did not tell me?"

"How do you know that I saw her, Alice?"—the

question was put in a very low voice, almost a whisper, in fact.

"Mrs. Rously told me so. She could not sleep that night—she saw you meet the woman 'Louise'—in the corridor, and she spoke to me about it. That is what first set me thinking. On the evening of the accident I met Louise near the gates of the park, and I saw her face. Philip, I knew—yes, I knew then; I understood so well why Quentin suffered. I am not his wife, Philip—there has been some dreadful mistake. I do not believe that it is entirely Quentin's fault, but nothing can alter it. We are not married, my dear boy; I have my life to begin all over again—you mustn't say 'No,' Philip, because it is true. I am nothing but a wretched woman whom all the world will laugh at—they will insult me, and I shall not be able to resent it. Oh, our dear friends, how glad they will be! We are always more willing to be glad than sorry when one we know is in a trouble of this kind. Some one else, we say, is as bad as we are, and is found out. Yes, I can hear them all talking—and the humiliation, the dreadful humiliation of it. If I had more courage, Philip, I should know what to do. But I am a coward, a real coward because I am afraid of this."

It was all very pitiful to hear, and it cut Philip to the quick. Vainly from sentence to sentence he tried to interrupt her that he might speak some reassuring word—but wit failed to find that word for him, and left him without suggestion. What could he say—how should he advise her? In truth there was nothing but the commonplace to be said. She had told her story as the world would tell it presently, and who would spare this proud girl whose pride had humbled so many in its victories?

"You are very far from being a coward, Alice," he said at length. "What is better still, you have plenty of common-sense. I am going to speak to you as frankly as if you were my own sister. If I were you I would change nothing, think of nothing, until I had the whole story of this woman's marriage and of her life since her marriage. Ask one of your friends to undertake this act of friendship for you and wait until he is able to tell you everything. If she is honest, inquiry will not hurt her—if it's the other thing, you are doing the man who loves you the greatest possible kindness. I have talked it all over with Quentin, and it remains one of the greatest mysteries which has ever confronted me. And now I am going to tell you another thing, Alice. I was in Paris on the night when this woman met with the accident which every one thought was fatal. I saw her fall myself; I read the accounts of her death. It is true that the net caught her and then broke—I suppose that saved her, but the French papers reported her death, and your husband received the official account of it—mind you, on the official documents supplied by the Consul. How such a certificate came to be issued is a thing we must first find out. Then, again, there is the question of his marriage—a marriage which took place in San Francisco, nearly nine years ago. Was it a valid marriage? He has been quite honest in the matter, and I do not see how he could have done more than he did to convince himself of Isabella's death. For some reasons of her own, she wished to deceive him. I thought at first that it was blackmail, but I do not now believe that it was. The greater probability is that she wanted to get rid of him for good when the certificate was sent. We shall imagine nothing, however, until we know. This friend of yours intends to find it all out,

Alice, if you give him permission. He is not at all inclined to take your own serious view. He believes in hope—perhaps in the best. The woman is not likely to be troublesome—had she meant to be so, she would not have left Knowl as she did——"

"She is a very beautiful woman, Philip. I cannot think that Quentin was not in love with her."

"Beautiful, yes—but is a man like Quentin, with all his ideas of home, and rest, and happiness, is he the man to be attracted simply by that? He tells me that they were never in sympathy from the first day of their marriage. They parted upon a perfect understanding of incompatibility. She had no claim upon him; she surrendered everything willingly. Some day, perhaps, we shall know why. It may be sooner than you think."

He waited for her to say that he must be this friend he spoke of, but she did not say it. Woman-like, she inclined, rather, to accepted facts than to others which might be made known later. The day had struck a blow whose wound would never heal. Alice could picture to herself little beyond the jibes of the world and the wreck of her own fortunes. What was she to-day but an outcast among women? Upon whom had she a claim for shelter and for love? A hard code preached often but rarely practised forbade her for one single instant to adopt the *rôle* which Philip would assign to her. No, she must quit Knowl, quit this new home of hers and return to the old way of comparative poverty. Ah, the shame of that, the utter abjection of it!

"Would it make much difference to me, this 'why'?" she asked him in return. "Don't you see, Philip, that it is just the same, whether she is honest or the other

thing? He's married to her—you can't change that. Oh, yes, I may grow old waiting for the day when he can divorce her; I may suffer all the shame of it, and then find out that it was not necessary. You could promise me a happy old age when my friends who had slandered me were dead, and nothing mattered. I can't wait for it, Philip; it must be to-day, now, for ever. I will not suffer the doubt—I haven't the heart to suffer it and I am all alone."

Philip saw that she was growing a little hysterical, and he well imagined what it cost her to bear up. The irony of his own position seemed nothing less than tragic. Here she was, a free woman by all the laws, and yet honour forbade him to remind her of her freedom. He would have laid down his life for her; would have defied the world to point a finger at her had he not been Quentin's friend. As it was, the man in him said, "Silence—be true."

"Have you seen Quentin?" he asked, a little later on. "Have you talked it over together, Alice?"

"He is not well enough. When he is better, I shall go and say 'Goodbye' to him. It must be that at present, Philip—I cannot live with him now. A woman need not be very good to shrink from a life like that. I have been a good woman as the world goes, but this is not to be thought of. Oh, I know what you are going to say! It is not a moral age, and all that kind of thing. I'll ask you something in return. Do the immoral women in society ever understand their real position? I don't think they do. It's only when exposure comes that they really see things in a true light. Then self-respect speaks. Mine has been dinning in my ears all day. It says, 'Go, go, go!' I'm just like some one who has been standing upon the edge of a precipice, and runs

away from it after looking down. The way is clearer to me now—I cannot make a mistake. You of all, Philip, would be the first to say so."

"Under certain circumstances, yes. If it is finally proved that Isabella Montanes is his wife, then it will be time enough to speak of definite things. I saw her in London yesterday——"

"You saw her, Philip—you spoke to her?"

She was standing now, her eyes flashed, the colour came back to her cheeks. An idea of proximity followed the knowledge that this man at her side had talked yesterday with Quentin's wife. Isabella Montanes might have been at Philip's elbow.

"Yes, I saw her. She is a beautiful woman, but not one that a man of culture could live with. She told me that she had written to you—is it true?"

"Yes, yes; she wrote to me—there is the letter. She must be a wicked woman, or she would never have written it."

"Is she civil, or threatening?—I am a little curious."

"Neither one nor the other. You see, she asks me to tell Lady Leverton—she masqueraded as her maid, you know—that she is called away to France by the illness of a relative. If Quentin had not told me his story, the letter would mean nothing. You see it is signed simply 'Isabella Montanes.'"

"She forgot her *nom de théâtre*, then?"

"Yes, she called herself Louise, and came to spy upon us. She will try to blackmail Quentin presently—they all do, and this one has the right. My God, yes, a wife's rights—a wife's, Philip! And he must do his duty by her. She can compel him to."

"Then why has she not compelled him before this?"

"I don't know. I can't think—it's just an awful mystery, a black curtain I dare not pull aside, Philip."

"But I shall pull it aside, Alice—with a firm hand, too. Have you spoken to Lady Alcester yet? Does she know?"

"My mother?—oh, no, no! I shall never tell her, Philip—at least, not until I must."

"The 'must' may be many a long year off. I think you are wise. Keep your own counsel and wait. If I may say one thing more, it is this—forgive Quentin. He has suffered much, and will suffer more. You alone can make that suffering lighter. At present he has not an idea that you know anything. Keep him in ignorance—let things go on as they are going until it is absolutely necessary to change them. Alice, you will do that for a good man's happiness. You can't refuse me."

She sighed and turned away.

"Yes," she said slowly, "if I can, Philip, if I can."

And upon this he left her, and it was not until he had closed the door behind him that she buried her head upon the pillow and in a wild outburst of weeping told herself that life had nothing more to give her, and that her heart was broken.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DISTANT LIGHT

QUENTIN had lived a hard life, but his physique was unimpaired, and he made what the doctors called a good recovery. Christmas week at Knowl Manor found him as active as a man can be upon a pair of good crutches; and he appeared to join with some spirit in those forced and not unwelcome gaieties which the season presses alike upon the willing and the unwilling. The poor relations of both families assisted to lay that ghost of apprehension which threatened the happiness of man and wife and the very existence of their home-life. A servants' ball, a frolic for the village children, a tenants' dinner in Christmas week, and upon these the regular breakfasts to the Hunt kept Knowl alive and postponed that understanding which could not now be long delayed. None the less, Quentin welcomed delay as men will when time may be their salvation. The disappearance of Isabella and his belief that Alice was unaware of her existence contributed to the indolence of his resolution. Why should he inflict this blow upon a woman who loved him to satisfy the scruples of a tradition or the common conventionalities of the common creed? In the sight of God Alice was his wife, and he would accept no counsel

which set up a false idol of duty, or prated of her real situation and the crime of it. And yet for all this the fear of a tragic moment haunted him perpetually. There was scarcely an hour when he could shake off that dread of the messenger at the gate or the accident which would reveal the truth. Alice's letters, her movements, the tone of her voice, the expression of her face were so many omens of disaster to him. Each day he read them; the long nights found him waking, and once more asking himself—Am I doing my duty by her? Is it not right that she should know? And the natural result of it all was a new, a mastering love for her, such as he had not believed possible for him or any other man. He longed for her caresses with the hunger of a lad for the first kiss which unlocks the gates of passion. Her coldness, her hesitation tortured him with a hundred doubts. He did not associate it with Isabella; the true story was well kept from him; but, none the less, the mystery of it remained and deepened with the days. She loved him no longer, he said—it might be that liberty would be welcome to her.

Men find an antidote to trouble in widely different remedies; some in the stress and strain of affairs; others in the pursuit of that which is wrongly called "life"; a few, and these the wiser ones, in solitude. Quentin was among the last, and so assiduously did he seek the solitudes of Knowl that his excursions became the common talk of the village and of the servants' hall. Not even in his wild days in America had he known the meaning of the word so truly. Fearful as he was that the end of the play would come swiftly in some dramatic climax which must shame him before the world, he began to avoid the common recrea-

tions of his leisure, and, so soon as his health permitted, to explore the remotest and the loneliest boundaries of his estate. The long nights of winter found him abroad, tramping across the hills or returning homeward by the wooded lowlands. He became a well-known and generous figure to many a hind who guarded a meadow; the gipsies down by Pearman's Spinney waited, wet or fine, to beg of him as he passed homeward by the coppice. One afternoon, and Quentin long remembered it, a gipsy girl asked him laughingly to let her read his palm; and, rigid unbeliever that he was, he stood a moment beneath the oak giant and held out a thin hand to her. "You will go a journey, but you will not find what you want," the girl said naïvely, lifting her black eyes boldly to his own; and, amused that he should listen to such a pretty impostor, he bade her continue. Thereupon she told him the common cant of an illness at the age of eighteen, and how that he had crossed the sea to win his bride; that his life was to be a long one, and that health, and wealth, and happiness were marked for him in the girdles about the wrist. This douche upon his hopes of a gloomy prophecy sent him homeward in no pleasant mood, and he began to perceive that what he really wished for was just such a tragic *dénouement* as fate denied him. Let accident tell Alice of the calamity, and the rest were easy—but accident refused to befriend him, and when the end came it was gradual, nay, almost imperceptible, as the final scenes of tragedy sometimes are.

Had Quentin been asked to record this climax himself, he would have named Alice's departure from Knowl as the first page of it. She left the Manor House in the first week of the new year, and pretending to no more serious business than a shopping expedition in

London, she said that it would be absurd to open their town house, and that she would stay at the Savoy Hotel. Her manner remained what it had been since Philip Rose had spoken of Isabella with her. A woman of moods, she appeared sometimes to be about to cast all her resolutions to the winds and to say to Quentin—"This charge is true, deny it if you can." At other moments an intense and savage jealousy drove her to claim every tribute of love he could offer her; and the old passionate affection would dominate her, and almost persuade her to accept the present that her future might defy the assaults of fortune. The hidden hours when the torture of the shame returned in all its poignancy were spoken of to none. She had neither friend nor confidant now that Philip Rose had gone—and it remained typical of her sphere and its teaching that her own mother was the last person in all the world to whom she would have confessed the truth. When she determined to visit London she had it in her mind that separation from the man she loved would help her to a final and a just decision; but she understood that she might never return to him, and for that very reason the farewell embarrassed them both.

"I am very much alone, Alice," he said upon the morning of their departure, when he entered her boudoir to say "goodbye" to her. "Of course you must go—but it will be a charity to come back as soon as you can."

She answered him evasively, for, in plain truth, now that the moment had come she welcomed the opportunity to escape from the Manor and all that it had meant to her during the weeks of doubt.

"You should ask some men down," she said quietly. "Philip would come, and your old friend Morrell,

I shan't stay long, of course, but I really can't put it off, dear."

"You'll write often, Alice—I like your letters; I think we say more to each other in letters than we ever do when we are alone together. Write to me when you can. I have little else to do but to read now."

"I'll send Philip down," she said, still avoiding his caress. "It will be all right when you can ride again—and if you're dull, you must run up to town after me. Really, my dear Quentin, I might be going to America. Now, isn't it a little ridiculous?"

The evasive argument defied him, and he must perforce be content with her vague promise which circumstance alone compelled him to doubt. Her letters from London were brief, and for that reason quite unsatisfying. She told him of shopping excursions, of the presence of this person or that in town; described the plays she had seen, and the scratch parties she had attended; but she was never intimate in her expression, and it became plain as the days went on and the letters came at longer intervals, that intimacy of word was the last thing she desired. When the month of February ran nearly to its end and still she had not returned, Quentin awoke suddenly to the fact that here was the climax for which he had been waiting, and that in all probability she would never return to him. How or by what means she had come by the truth he could not imagine; that it was known to her he no longer doubted; and the knowledge carried him immediately out of his slough of inaction and sent him without the loss of a single hour to London after her.

A wet and gloomy day of lagging winter heralded his departure from Knowl. The great bare park lay

beneath a cloud of steaming vapour, and the mist dripped from every tree and hedgerow, and shut from his view the hither valley and the hills beyond it. He could not forbear reflecting with what fine hopes he had entered his father's house five months ago, and how greatly that hope had failed him. His ambitions of rest, and love, and happiness, what an irony they seemed to-day! And yet he was conscious of no act of his which had merited this play of fortune, this irony of a bitter destiny. He had lived the life which is lived by thousands of men who are permitted the recompense of years and the content of finality; and his reward was this, that he must become a wanderer, and again go forth upon the nomad's pilgrimage. An obstinate courage, a dogged determination to fight his own battle to the very end, alone sustained him. He would take up Fortune's glove and answer her by deeds.

There was better weather in the South that day, and London with her garish lights and her hustling crowds, her noise and her clamour, and that ever-present suggestion of continuing activities, suited his mood far better than the country. It had been his intention when he quitted Knowl to go straight to Alice's hotel, and there and then come to the great and final understanding with her; but when he thought it over, reflecting how very little mere words or protestations could affect the vital truth, and how poor a counsellor a man is when the fortunes of his own house are concerned, he abandoned the idea, and directed his cabman to Clement's Inn, where Philip Rose might be found. For some while now he had been perplexed by Philip's silence and the ambiguous nature of his letters, and he was very anxious to have a chat with him; but they

told him at Clement's Inn that Mr. Rose was not there, and would not return for some days, to which fact the porter added the further information that another gentleman, a young clergyman, had just been asking the same question. Quentin guessed the identity of this inquirer at once. He would be the famous Father Dominic, he thought, the extraordinary young orator who had come to London with the quixotic idea of a mission to the rich.

Now, Philip had spoken many times of this young priest's wisdom and of the extraordinary sagacity and clearness of his intellect. He had recently removed his little community to Kensington, where he occupied an old house in Holland Park, and had built a chapel and refectory after the fashion of an Oxford College, gathering about him some of the most cultured scholars and cleverest brains which the University had recently honoured. He was spoken of as unusually sympathetic, and above all things discreet; and Quentin, remembering this report, determined to visit him, almost as soon as he heard his name. So he left his luggage at Claridge's Hotel, and without further hesitation drove on to Kensington, little dreaming how largely this impulse must guide him in the long months of night which were before him. It is possible that, at any other time, Quentin would have remarked the good taste of the home and the surroundings of a man who had left so deep a mark upon the higher side of the social life as Geoffrey Lister—now known as Father Dominic. But impatience to speak of his own trouble, an intense desire to meet a sympathetic ear, caused him to be an unappreciative visitor, and when a young "brother" in a cassock showed him into a small but exceedingly well-furnished ante-room, he remained

entirely ignorant of its merits or defects while he paced it as a caged animal until Father Dominic himself appeared. The two men had seen each other but twice before in their lives—once at Quentin's wedding, and afterwards at old Lady Alcester's reception; they met, however, with the cordiality which is the result of a common affinity, and at once fell to talking of mutual friends and their doings.

"I have seen Lady Alice several times," the priest began. "If I may say so, Shropshire has not done her much good. In the old days we went down into the country for the sake of pink cheeks and clear eyes. They sell the first at any shop nowadays, and clear eyes are something of a burden. We might see ourselves as we really are, you know. May I take another liberty, and say that you yourself do not look like a man who has just returned from three months' hunting——"

"Say rather from a month on my back with a broken leg," Quentin rejoined with a laugh.

Father Dominic had heard nothing of the accident, but he did not apologise.

"I have little time for newspapers. A man wants the latest news, no doubt, but he could generally read it in five minutes. I am not in the least interested in the dinner-parties given yesterday, and I fail to see how any one can be. If you ate the dinner, you probably have a headache; if you did not eat, it's a poor consolation to know who did. You must forgive my ignorance. I understand now why you look so pale."

"Then understanding is easy," rejoined Quentin a little bitterly. "Have you ever reflected, Father, how very little a man's appearance tells us of his thoughts? We say he is jolly-looking—his laugh may be at the irony of his own misfortunes; we say he is depressed—

he may be merely serious ; we think he is angry—he is only reflecting ; we pronounce him to be happy—he may be the most miserable creature alive. Yes, appearances are as deceitful as the old adage makes them out to be."

Geoffrey Lister was as quick as any man alive to catch the tone of a voice or the meaning of a phrase ; and directly his visitor began to speak in this strain his mind leaped to the truth. "He has come here to seek my help," he said, and the knowledge transformed him in a moment from the flippant gossip of the day to the kindly and patient servant of misfortune, ever ready to hear and to help.

"Mr. Caird," he said very gently, "I should have known it. You did not come here to speak of common things ; you came to speak of yourself. Please let me be your friend. Who knows? Even I may be able to serve you."

Quentin remembered long afterwards the pleasing tones of this musical voice and the deep emotions it stirred within him. The house to which he had come was as silent as the tomb ; the half-lighted corridors did not re-echo the soft steps of the shadowy figures which moved along them upon a swift purpose ; the city's voice could not be heard through the massive walls which hid Geoffrey Lister's work from the world. And within the room itself a flicker of the firelight shone upon the young priest's face ; he bent to it as though to read some human story in its flame ; and there sitting, scarcely moving, he heard the history of a life, and pitied the man who must speak of such tragic despair.

"What shall I do, where does my duty lie?"—such was the sum of Quentin's appeal.

Geoffrey Lister did not at once answer the question,

but when he had gazed into the fire for some considerable time, he said without turning his face or moving even a hand—

"Your duty lies toward your wife."

"You mean that I am to return to my house and live as I have been living—do you mean that?"

"No, no," said the priest quickly. "I mean that your duty lies towards the woman who is your wife by all laws of justice, human and Divine. There can be no qualification, Mr. Caird. I think you yourself understand that, or these circumstances would not so greatly distress you. I cannot say otherwise; your duty is toward your wife."

"You think that I should return to her—live with her again—is it that, Father?"

The young priest had never been called upon in all his experience to listen to such a story, and this second question wrung from him the quick confession of his own doubt.

"I dare not say so. Who am I to judge for you? The story is your own; there must be so many pages of it which I cannot read. Oh, yes, I pity you—pity you with all my heart and soul! And the Lady Alice—no, I cannot speak of her——"

"It is upon her account that I come to you. What right have I to inflict this shame upon her before the world? If she suffer, my act has made her suffer. Does not this justify me in hushing things up if I can do so? Would you not say that it is reason enough for silence and the subterfuge? I can do justice to Isabella Montanes—I am rich enough. She left me of her own accord. Do you still say that she has such a claim upon me that because of it I must ruin a good woman's life and send her out disgraced before the world? I cannot

think so, Father; I could not believe a gospel which would teach me that."

"And yet there is a Divine word which says a man shall quit father and mother and cleave to his wife. Consider what it is to be put down upon the other side. You married this woman when she was a mere child. It was yours to make her the wife you wished her to be. Yes, your influence wisely exerted could have done much for the mutual happiness of your home. Did you exert it, or did you accept circumstances as they came? You found her wilful, wild, untutored, sighing for the freedom she had left, and interested in none of the things which interested you. Whose fault was it that this condition continued? Did you try to alter it? I think you admit that you did not. You permitted her to go from you without question; you did not ask what dangers, what troubles she would meet with by the way. Then you blame her indifference. You hear that she has entered a theatre, and you are not even concerned to know what kind of life she is leading there. It is true that your circumstances did not permit you to help her with money, but I cannot think that any circumstance justified your desertion of her. She wished it, you say; but was she old enough to be permitted the license of her inclinations? You made no effort to keep her, and you blame her because she went. That is what the ultimate judgment must be, Mr. Caird. If she has done anything which forbids us to regard her as an honest woman, you may justly urge that as a reason for refusing to go back to her. Until you can say that, both law and justice demand that you shall not only recognise but protect her. I can give you no other advice. God knows it costs me much to advise you at all."

Quentin believed that it was so. He never forgot that

honest hour when a man's pitying voice told him the truth without fear or reservation. All that was said, the keen perception it displayed, the absolute honesty won his admiration, but filled him with an apprehension surpassing anything he had known. Was his duty, indeed, as this man named it? Did it direct him to seek Isabella out? to offer her protection, shelter and a home? He believed that it did, though he cringed before the verdict. And the woman he loved heart and soul, what of her? Yes, Geoffrey Lister was wise when he said that he did not dare to think of the Lady Alice.

"I must have time!" he exclaimed at last. "Nothing must be done that cannot be undone. Could you shelter me for a day or two in your house, Father? I shall not be a troublesome visitor. The doctors insist upon my going South before March. My own place is shut up, and, of course, I cannot open it now. Will you have me until I go abroad?"

The assent was immediate and gracious. Father Dominic had built a house in Western London that it might shelter those in trouble. Here was just such a case as he had in his mind when he opened the retreat, and he responded to Quentin's request with all the warmth of cordial sincerity.

"I would have asked you to do so if my courage had not failed me. Yes, dear friend, stay with us, and make our house your own. I pray God it will show you the light."

And so Quentin sent to the hotel for his luggage; and while he slept that night a choir of voices chanted the Eternal Praises, and mingled its harmonies with the fitful clouds of a city's pleasure.

CHAPTER XXIII

NEMESIS

ISABELLA MONTANES quitted London upon the third day after she had sent a message by Philip Rose to her husband. For the time being, at any rate, she had no intention of making a claim upon Quentin; and it was no mere affectation which declared that she had no intention of ultimately doing so. A creature of moods, it pleased her to think that she could befriend a man with whom she had spent merry months in the old wild years of long ago. She liked the *rôle*, liked to think that she could ruin this home, and yet had spared it. If, in less pleasant moments, she reflected that her history would be much better out of a law court than in it, a woman's vanity cut such reflections short and harked back to her original compact. In her more generous outbursts Quentin became just the "old pal" of her childhood. She would have been very glad of some of his money, but she refused to ask for it for two good reasons: one, that she was in some sense an honest woman; the second that she did not for a moment believe that she had any real title to it.

So she decided to quit London and to find upon the Continent that recreation and employment now becoming necessary to her very existence. Brussels

amused her for a spell—she appeared there as a Spanish dancer, and after that in the *rôle* of La Mandolina, especially created for her by a love-sick Belgian. Her success was never in doubt; she had the *abandon*, the *verve*, and the real musical knowledge so necessary to a certain class of theatre. Possibly she would have remained in Belgium until the summer came but for a paragraph in a French newspaper which told her that her old friends, the Spanish dancers, were once more at the Théâtre des Beaux Arts in Paris, and that they performed there under the direction of that mad admirer of hers, Juan de Juni. Hitherto her relations with this handsome young Spaniard had been above reproach. She had withstood his pursuit of her, his passionate offers of marriage, his obviously earnest devotion so long as she had known him; but she was very much alone in Brussels, and the prospect of delightful reunions, of amusing flirtations, and of recreating associations dear to her settled the question at the first time of asking, and she set out for Paris the moment her engagement permitted her to do so.

In the ordinary course of affairs such a journey should have awakened no apprehensions whatever in the traveller's mind. Isabella had no doubt of the welcome which would be offered to her; no doubt of the reception she would receive from her old comrades, and yet even her bravado and self-satisfaction were not entirely satisfied by this visit. But slightly acquainted with French law, she asked herself sometimes if it would punish a woman for dying and coming to life again. They had warned her of this the last time she was in Paris, but nothing had happened, and although her stay had been a brief one, it fully restored her confidence. What a comedy it had been, and how success-

ful! She recalled vividly those amusing months when that young madcap Count Lucien Bernay had offered her the remnants of a fortune and the whole of an exceedingly impressionable heart, to say nothing of such scraps of intellect as fortune had blessed him with. They were to return to America together and there to be married; but it would never do, the Count said, for his name to be linked to that of La belle Esmeralda, the dancer. No, she must die in Paris—an old Spanish family, conveniently extinct, must supply the necessary ancestors for this child of the theatre. And so the report of her death was noised abroad, both to deceive her first husband, should he be living, and to save the Count's name if name remained to him. Destiny, capricious beyond ordinary, permitted this pleasant idea to go to the very gates of success. The Count and Isabella left Paris together for Havre. They lost the American steamer, and, waiting for the next, the aforesaid remnants of fortune were so quickly dissipated that the hazard of the venture occurred to them both, and they abandoned it as a merry jest which might have been but was not. During the two years which followed upon the tragic comedy of the interrupted marriage, Isabella visited India, Australia, and South America; then she returned to Paris for a spell, and there she was seen by Quentin during his honeymoon. Her life became a succession of triumphs and of difficulties. She could have married fools in many cities, but she possessed too much intellect to link her fortune with theirs; and she passed from continent to continent, the child of caprice and the messenger of gaiety. Sometimes, when her fortunes came in upon a flood-tide, she rose momentarily to great heights of extravagance and display, buying carriages and jewels, flaunting her un-

doubted charms before rich and ready dupes, and passing for a veritable queen of the variety stage. When the tide ebbed and the shoals of debt were exposed to the sun, Isabella accepted the new condition with the same imperturbable good humour as she had welcomed the old. Garrets could not tame, nor creditors make war upon her infinite variety. Did she break the patience of a city, scatter her admirers, and leave her dupes sadder if not wiser men, what mattered it? The world was large, and the credulity of mankind inexhaustible. Isabella had few trunks to pack upon such occasions. Hers was a ship that passed in the night—to more congenial climates, and more obliging worshippers.

It was during this period of her "grand tour" that Quentin succeeded to his father's heritage and passed in a single hour from the nadir of poverty to the zenith of wealth. Isabella, it may be, had forgotten his very existence by this time, or, if she remembered it, it was to laugh at a girlish episode, and to recall for the benefit of an admiring company the days when she had been "a good little wife," and had possessed a husband, a pug dog, and a priest's blessing. That Quentin would become a rich man was not for her in the gamut of the possibilities. Even had she contemplated it, she would not have added a single comma to the scheme of her own life. Riches meant little to such a woman. Money she looked upon as a vicious necessity which must be thought of when tradesmen stood within the gates and the family jewels were temporarily in custody. And, certainly, riches would never have tempted her to abandon that free existence which had become as necessary to her as the sunshine itself. When, upon her return to Europe for the second time, she read an account of Quentin's

marriage, it was with a certain sense of relief. At least she had done with him. Inclination said so emphatically, though another motive asserted itself presently to give inclination the lie. This was nothing more or less than a woman's curiosity. Her husband's bride! What was she like? Did he love her? Was she a beautiful woman—as beautiful as the little Spanish girl he had married in San Francisco? Six months of such questioning sent Isabella upon her mad visit to Knowl. It was a venture worthy of her, and, to do her justice, she had it in her mind but to satisfy her curiosity about the English girl, and then say goodbye to both of them for ever. So she came to England and brought tragedy with her, as we have seen; but she fled from tragedy upon the first opportunity, and that which she carried with her, perhaps unconsciously, was a fierce hatred of the mistress of Knowl. Could she have wounded Alice, the blow would have been struck without hesitation. But she shrank from inflicting an injury upon Quentin, and so we find her once more at Brussels—thence returning boldly to Paris, she cared not with what consequences.

Isabella quitted Brussels at the end of the second week in March, when the tawdry *fêtes* of the Mi-Carême were delighting as many of the multitude as cared to venture forth into the mud and the cold to enjoy them. Glad to breathe the congenial air of the capital again, she set off at once for the theatre, and introduced herself without any kind of apology whatever. Her train had not reached Paris until seven o'clock; the crude entertainment at the Beaux Arts was in full swing when she entered its shabby green-room, and striking a dramatic attitude suitable to so momentous an occasion, cried aloud that the dead had come to life. The immediate

result of this womanly bravado was in some way disappointing. Women in tights, dancers in bewildering gauzes, gentlemen who balanced themselves upon tight-wires—these cast indifferent glances upon the stranger, and were about to resume their intellectual discourse when a little Spanish girl, drawing close to Isabella, lifted her veil, and then shouted wildly, "La belle Esmeralda—viva, viva!" Such undoubted testimony brought the company to its feet instantly. French women, convinced beyond argument, threw themselves into Isabella's arms and kissed her rapturously. The men greeted her cordially and as a comrade. Her old lover, the Spaniard, Juan de Juni, took instant advantage of the occasion to ask her to supper. She boxed his ears playfully, telling him that she had returned for no other purpose.

"Not even for an engagement, my beautiful Persian?"

"Certainly—but not for marriage, Holiness. Come, I will have supper with you, and you shall tell me the news. You do not have the opportunity of entertaining a miracle every day. Am I not twice returned from the dead, my Juan? Let the fat calf be killed, and we will have our *fête* to-night. Ha, you think I have no money, but wait and see. We cannot spend our savings in the other world, we bring them back to our comrades in Paris. Ah, my children, how I love you, how glad I am to come home again."

She spoke with real affection, and some of the company reciprocated it warmly. Of those who drew back and had no appetite for the festive veal was little Inez of Cordova, who had long usurped Isabella's places in the transient affections of Maître Juan, and was by no means willing to be dispossessed of them.

"Look at the American cat," she said aside to

Hernandez, the buffoon, who drew up already a mental menu of the supper he would eat; "she has come here after a man or she would not come at all. I suppose that fool Juan will be running after her again, eh? Well, we shall see what we shall see. I know something about her, and I don't intend to keep my mouth shut this time. Faugh, the brute, I don't wonder the Count died!"

Hernandez remarked that death was often merciful, and went across to congratulate Isabella. The night became famous in the story of the Beaux Arts; and for months afterwards, Hernandez and Giuseppa and Flora, acrobats, singers, dancers, and clowns, told you of the great supper at the Taverne Royale; of the toasts which were drunk, and the champagne which had been consumed, and the glasses which were broken—in short of the welcome to the amazing Esmeralda whom no grave would hold, nor city claim.

So Isabella rejoined her old comrades and once more took her place among them. For precisely three weeks the experiment proved an undoubted success. Under the *nom de théâtre* of Estrella, the vivacious Spaniard danced her way back to the Parisian's heart, became a Lenten furore and an Easter reputation; drew the customary admirers to her train, and stood for the goddess of the fledglings. How long such a popularity might have endured, or what the next page of her story had been in the common course of events, the historian of her life may not say. She was arrested upon the information of the charming Inez for stealing official documents exactly twenty-one days after the return to Paris; and before twenty hours had passed the news flashed to London and the capitals that a Spanish dancer charged with forging a death certificate in Paris had given it out to the police that she was the wife of the English

millionaire Quentin Caird, and that he would answer for her.

She had not meant to harm her comrade, but a French prison frightened her as she had never been frightened before—and the one man in all Europe she believed would befriend her was the husband she had so greatly wronged.

CHAPTER XXIV

FACE TO FACE

THE wasp-like Lady Alcester, still ignorant of the tragedy which had overtaken her daughter, became the tenant of old Lady Reedham's house in John Street, Berkeley Square, about the date of Quentin's departure for Cannes, and here she lured the ancient General Oscar upon all possible and impossible occasions, confiding in him her direst secrets over the tea-table, and languishing to tears upon the smallest possible provocation.

"My poor, poor girl," she would say, "twelve months married and treated like this. The man is mad. They say that he has taken to religion. Just think of it—to religion! Could you want any other proof?"

The General admitted that the case looked doubtful, but he added with a leer that many husbands were not so obliging.

"Some women that I know would not complain," he suggested. "She's a big allowance, I suppose, and two fine places. What more does she want? Men—oh, they follow the flag when a pretty girl, who's rich, carries it. I should let sleeping dogs lie, Mary. This one could bite if he tried. He comes of the right stock."

Mary, it must be admitted, had no intention what-

ever of waking the particular dog in question, as long as a generous allowance was paid to her quarterly by Quentin's bankers. What she feared was some rupture of the domestic organism which would rob her of a provision so liberal. Entirely unable to learn from Alice's lips why Quentin had gone to the South of Europe alone, her ignorance could not be set down to lack of inquiry or any misunderstanding of those gentle arts by which domestic truths are to be learned. She pumped every one, from the butler to the kitchenmaids; attacked Quentin's friends resolutely; chased Philip Rose to the Shires and back again, and remained unanswered. Then came a new development. Alice had been down at Knowl for a few weeks during her husband's absence in the Riviera. She returned to London shortly after Easter; and, coming straight to John Street, announced her determination to remain there for an unknown period.

She had greatly changed, even the staunchest of her admirers admitted that. There were lines in the face which aged it above its due; deep ominous hollows beneath the eyes, and physical witnesses to grief not less significant. Of interests in the pursuits which had formerly engrossed her, she had none. She rarely visited her friends; did not go to the opera or the theatre; was not in any way concerned to repeat her triumphs of a former year.

"I am tired of it all," she said. "I simply do not care, mother. Please leave me to myself. Quentin will come back when he wishes to. I suppose people have quarrelled before, and will quarrel again. Is it really so very dreadful or new?"

Lady Alcester admitted that it was not.

"He is a most unreasonable man," she declared. "A

woman must have friends—I shall write and tell him so. This is what comes of marrying an industry. People of his class never understand; they have not been educated up to it. I suppose he is angry because you flirted with Danby. Did he tell you so? Men are generally dangerous when they are silent. Be discreet for a time, my dear. It would never do to have a separation before you have been married a year."

Alice expressed no opinion upon the wisdom or the folly of this possible issue. Masked by a pretence of ennui and indifference were the raging fires of humbled pride and outraged affections. How greatly she had suffered in the weeks of the truce, none but she herself would ever know. Sometimes the stress and strain of it all drove her to such a point of resentment against Fate that she kept her story from the world with difficulty. What did silence profit her? She was not Quentin's wife; nothing now could make her that. The lowest among women, she urged, had the right to point the finger at her and claim her as a sister. Any other marriage, however humble or unwise, could not have humiliated her as this marriage had done. At least she would have been a wife with the right to face the world proudly. If she loved Quentin, the power of her love abated before this overwhelming blow. And what would the future bring her? How long must this masquerade endure? To that question the answer came, not by any human mouth, but from the newspapers which recorded Isabella's confession. No longer was it possible to say publicity might be avoided. All London rang with the news. Old General Oscar came running to the house with it at ten o'clock in the morning; Philip Rose followed closely upon his heels. Alice would not see them. She left the expression of

the tragedy to Lady Alcester, and, to do that excellent woman justice, she rose to splendid heights of hysteria; and for the first time for many years the family doctor did not prescribe coloured water for her.

In the midst of this bewildering declaration, when half London believed the story to be true, and the other half stoutly maintained that the Spanish woman could be nothing but an adventuress, Quentin himself returned unexpectedly to town, and drove without a moment's hesitation to the house in John Street. There, the servants told him, in answer to his hurried question, that the Lady Alice had not left her bedroom for three days, and that "her ladyship" still remained in the doctor's hands. But he was determined to see his wife at any cost, and so, without an announcement, he went up to her room and entered it. Thus the two met for the first time since Alice had left Knowl upon a pretence of a brief visit to London, and meeting, they knew that this was the supreme moment in the story of two lives.

Quentin had come straight through from Cannes. He wore a dark travelling suit and a fur-lined coat, but his face was ghastly white, and the strong lips quivered when he addressed his wife. Alice, on her part, had been sitting in a low chair before the fire when he knocked upon the door, and she rose, half frightened, half glad, and stood trembling by the mantelshelf. What would he say to her? What could he say? And yet his friendship must still be precious. She realised now how much it had been to her in the past. Must she walk alone henceforth to the end of the days, or would his wit contrive a way? She waited to hear him.

"Alice," he began, without any preface, "I want to

know if you have seen this paragraph? I have come from Cannes to ask you the question."

The paper was a copy of the Paris *New York Herald* containing the account of Isabella's confession which the London dailies had already copied. Alice hardly glanced at it when she answered him—

"Yes, I have read it, Quentin; but it was not necessary."

"Not necessary——"

"Yes, I knew your story the day after the accident. I guessed that there was a story many months ago. Don't you think it would have been wiser if you had told me? I should not have judged you hardly, Quentin—I am not a vindictive woman; I think I could have pitied you if you had told me. Nothing could have been worse than this. You could have saved me from it if you had wished."

She turned her face away, resolute in her determination to show no weakness. He understood her, and determined that neither pity nor regret should unman him.

"I must submit to your judgment," he said quietly. "God knows I have done you wrong enough, Alice. Will you let me tell you the story of it before you judge me? It may help us both. The time for silence is past. Let me speak to you from my heart——"

She sighed heavily, but assented to his wish, seating herself in her low chair by the fire. Quentin, however, continued to stand, while he recited to her the history of his life. Not once did he attempt to excuse himself. His story must speak for itself, he thought, and so he told it to her, without aside or argument.

"I believed this woman to be dead. Her friends sent me the official documents from Paris. A wiser

man might have doubted them, but there was nothing in our relations to lead me to doubt them. I had not seen her for some years. She had no interest in me or my life. I never regarded her as a dangerous woman, and the evidences of her death were many. She undoubtedly met with a terrible accident in Paris. The French newspapers said that it was fatal. Then came this forged certificate. Alice, in my place you would have accepted the proof. There is not one in a hundred thousand who would have done otherwise."

So he concluded his long recital, and it became his turn to wait for her judgment now. She had listened to him with a womanly patience which surprised him, for he expected a scene so different—tears and reproaches, and perhaps a violent outburst. And now, when all was told, she seemed dumb upon it. Many minutes passed, indeed, before she uttered a single word, and when she spoke it was to ask a woman's question.

"Did it never occur to you, Quentin, that this woman might have had an object in deceiving you? Did you not think that she might wish to marry another man?"

He answered her question instantly, eagerly—

"As God in heaven hears me, I thought of nothing but my own freedom and the new life before me. I said that a boy's folly had been mercifully dealt with; I determined that my gratitude should find expression in some new ambition of life. You could not know what that message meant to a man who believed that he had ruined himself, body and soul, at the dictation of a lad's passion. I had seen so many chained for life to an evil landmark of their youth. I said that I had been dealt with otherwise. Yes, I admit the crime of it; I should have gone to Paris, visited the officials, learned

where my dead wife had been buried, made sure beyond all possibility of error. I did not do these things; I thought only of myself. It was human, and I did it."

"And doing it you ruined for ever the one woman you professed to love. Quentin, you thought much of yourself; did you ever think of me?"

He stooped and clutched her by the wrist, compelling her to look up at him.

"Thought of you—does my face tell you nothing, then? Thought of you? God!—has there been a moment since I knew the truth when your sweet image has not been at my side to tell me that my life was lived? Look at me, Alice, tell me if this is the man who has wronged you willingly? Say if I thought of myself night or day when the shadow of the shame was upon me, and I knew that I must lose you? No, you cannot tell me that. You are a woman, and you can pity."

His determination to do nothing which would unman him deserted him for this brief moment of her accusation, and he loosed her hand, and hid his face from her. And in that instant, perhaps, love for the man who had wronged her first truly touched Alice's heart. So different it was from any conception of love she had hitherto known, such an overwhelming desire of protection and the stronger will; such a revolt against the cruelty of her own life, such a quickening of those vital emotions which link two human souls together, making of the twain bodies one flesh, that all her vows, all her coldness, all her questioning left her, and with a low cry, at once of joy and pain, she drew the sobbing face down to her, and kissing the hot lips, she cried—

"I forgive you, Quentin, my husband, I forgive you. Let us live for the hope of each other; let us care

nothing what the world will say of me; I am yours, heart and soul. Quentin, my husband, pity me."

Henceforth they spoke of their future more openly and with less reserve. Never since their marriage was confidence so easy or confession so willing. And first Quentin told her of those quixotic impulses inspired by the high ideals of Geoffrey Lister. He was no longer afraid to declare that Isabella Montanes had a certain claim upon him. She was his wife in the eyes of the law. It might be that the marriage might prove invalid; but he had no right to assume so until the law decreed it. Meanwhile, the least he could in justice do was to make some provision for this woman, and to satisfy himself that she had no excuse for any course of conduct she might choose to pursue. With this Alice was in full accord. Undoubtedly conscience dictated some such course. She, herself, remained in no doubt as to her duty.

"We must separate, Quentin," she said emphatically; "we must not let the world point the finger at us. I shall live with my mother. I can only wait and hope for the future. It may be kinder to us. At least it is something to live and hope."

"Yes," he said quickly, "and your home shall be my home, and the mistress of Knowl shall be its mistress still. Of course, nothing will be changed. My fortune is yours, Alice. Everything that I possess is yours. I can imagine no circumstance which would make it otherwise. You are the one woman on earth for me. Nothing can ever alter that. The mockery we call public opinion concerns us little. We must do what is right in the face of calamity, and leave the rest to Fate. I intend now to seek out Isabella and to learn from her own lips exactly how we stand toward each other. She

may be willing to tell me—if she is an honest woman, as I believe her to be, she will do so. But I shall not return to you, Alice, if it should be otherwise. I have no right to return to you. I owe that much to your love."

She accepted his resolution without demur.

"You are right to go," she said, though she would have given the youth of her life could she have said, "You shall not go." Thereafter she went on to confess her own intention. "I may not live at Knowl, dearest Quentin. This, at least, I owe to my friends and my name. Remember, I have no legal claim upon you whatever. It is hard to admit it, but the world would judge me rightly if it could say that I consented to live henceforth upon your bounty. It would be that indeed. You yourself in after years would esteem me less if I consented to this. I will fight my own battle until you return to me. And you will come back, Quentin, my husband; you will come back some day. I believe it, I know it as I believe in my God. But you must leave me until you have the right to come. It is not convenience which successfully defies the opinion of its friends; it is honour, Quentin. My honour bids me say I cannot live upon your bounty. You will thank me for doing so in the years to come."

She had made up her mind to this heroic course almost as soon as she had quitted Knowl, and her delay had been rather for his sake than for her own. Wisely or foolishly, whether at the dictates of a false estimation of her position or by a wise understanding of it, in the eyes of the world, she was determined that society should not charge her with this last offence. She had no title to Quentin's fortune, and would not touch it until she had. On his part, her resolution

came to him as a final and overwhelming blow utterly unlooked for in any moment of the tragedy. Woeful as it was for him to contemplate her situation, his money had promised to make it less unendurable, and in his resolve to surround her with every luxury, to gratify her lightest wish, to watch her needs as a child is watched by a father, he made some atonement to his conscience for all that had befallen her. And now she would rob him of this satisfaction, strip the last shred of his excuse and leave him to the bitterness of the knowledge that in poverty must her vigil be kept. In vain he contested her determination, pleaded with her, implored her as for some favour necessary to his own happiness. He could not shake her resolution.

"I will think of it, perhaps; but Quentin, you know what it would mean. Had all this been between you and me, it would be different. But the whole world knows it; I have not a friend who has not written to say that he is glad to think my pride is humbled. Oh, yes, they don't say that, but they mean it! And I shall show them that my pride is my own honour and self-respect. You cannot turn me from this, Quentin. You will not wish to, when you think of it. There has been a terrible mistake, and now we are resolved to set it right. I go to the world with that, but I keep my great love for you in my heart—yes, as long as I live; though I never see you more, you shall not be forgotten or loved the less because this grief has come. Believe it, my husband—I love you—I did not know how much until you made me suffer."

She held out her arms to him, and he drew her toward him as some precious possession he would keep by the iron tenacity of his will. The hours of the day, long drawn in doubt, and the agony of uncertainty were

remembered by him to his life's end. Night found them still together, wrestling with that vindictive destiny which thus had cut the bonds of their affection, and shut the daylight from their eyes. But each believed that the sun would rise again, and upon that at last they said "Good-night!"

And Quentin Caird went out blindly to the world; groping upon the way which conscience indicated; while the woman, who had loved him, bent her head because of the shame he had put upon her.

CHAPTER XXV

ACQUITTAL

THE arrest of "La belle Esmeralda" in Paris amused that susceptible city far more than the tawdry *fêtes* of the Mi-Carême, and proved a rival to the fervid sermons of pious monks, who thundered denunciations from the pulpits of Nôtre Dame. It was a nine days' wonder, certainly, but while it lasted you were confronted with the dancer's photograph everywhere, and there was hardly a stage of Paris which did not reflect the tragic comedy. At the music-halls exceedingly healthy comedians wrote their own death certificates and distributed them to the ladies of the ballet; a song with a catchy refrain in which the sorrows and the joys of the resurrected husband found vulgar expression became the tune for *gamins'* lips. Here the more sensational aspect of the case attracted but scant attention. None believed for a moment that Isabella was the wife of the rich Englishman. They attributed her confession to some ancient intrigue by which she sought to profit, and the boldness of the idea, the absurd nature of the charge, and the feminine impulses which had set it in motion, were entirely as every Parisian would have wished them to be. It needed but a judge's difficulty in convicting "La belle Esmeralda" to

set Paris roaring with laughter. The court in which she was tried could not hold the fashionable throngs which fought their way towards it; the very advocates indulged in a badinage before which justice should have been both blind and deaf. And then the climax came —the case could not be proved. Undoubtedly official documents had been stolen, but there was no evidence to convict "La belle Esmeralda" of the theft. Her *bel-ami*, Count Bernay, certainly had a well-shaped finger in this pretty pie; but he was in America, and the Republic had no intention of bringing him back. Therefore the hope of Paris must go free, and free she went, and a band of students was escort, and torches were lighted that night in her honour, and a thousand throats tired of bawling the lilting song:

Oh, la belle
Esmerelle
—Da—Da—Da.

Now, Quentin Caird arrived in Paris twenty-four hours after this hilarious liberation, and he came upon a mission which his own conscience approved and would not depart from. Long hours of almost passionate wrestling with destiny, and the closest introspection, urged him to this quixotic resolution to save his wife if that were possible, to meet her face to face, and to learn all that could be learned of her life and its claim upon him. In this Geoffrey Lister, the young priest, abetted him to the end. "Your duty is at her side," he said. "You may prove that she has forfeited all claim upon you, but she was your wife, and she remains so in the sight of your God. Go to her and be her friend. The way is difficult, but it is the only way."

Quentin believed it to be so, but for days he lingered

in London afraid of the step. To return to Isabella was publicly to forsake the woman he loved. True, there was an evil voice which whispered to him the plain truth that if the story were written, Alice would win less pity from a critical world; but he judged her more generously, believing that her faults were those of her education and surroundings and not of her will. And now he knew that she loved him—so much her last words told him beyond all doubt. By suffering and tragedy a truth had come to her which otherwise might have remained hidden to the end of her days. Quentin told no man of the suffering it cost him to follow the path of duty in this bitter hour, but he went to Paris unflinchingly at last, and arrived there to hear for the first time that the court had discharged "La belle Esmeralda," and that she had left the city.

It was ironical, a jest of destiny which seemed to mock his bravest schemes. At the theatre they told him that nothing was known of Isabella's movements, nor had any one heard of her since the acquittal. She had been staying at a little hotel on the Boulevard Montmartre; but there they said that she left Paris directly the trial was over, and it was believed that she went away in the company of Señor Juni, the young Spanish impressario. This statement received quick contradiction, for the Spaniard himself called upon Quentin at the Hôtel Ritz upon the following morning, and seemed as much surprised as any one else at "La belle Esmeralda's" flight.

"She was always mad," he said consolingly. "This has frightened her out of her wits. She will not return to Paris, I fear. You may hear of her at Brussels, but more likely she will be at Madrid. She is still a Spaniard at heart—such a woman takes the mother's

side, and her mother was born for the theatre at Seville. If I were you, I would go to Madrid first and afterwards to Seville. But who knows—these fireflies are everywhere. She may be dancing again at the Beaux Arts in a month's time."

Juan de Juni had a considerable experience of variety artists and their ways, and he was often a sad, if rarely a wise, man. "La belle Esmeralda" would have been a fortune to him at the crisis of the nine days' wonder, but he remembered how quickly Paris forgets, and how transient are the smiles she bestows upon her favourites. As for Quentin, the rebuff seemed a plain answer to the particular philosophy which had brought him to France, and he began to believe that he had fulfilled all that sentiment and honour could ask of him, and must now return to one whose need was so very real, and whose position in the eyes of the world so terrible. But if desire said, "Return," more sober judgment asked, "How shall you return, and to what?" Would honour permit him to live with Alice before the world and leave this great shadow upon their path? Was it just to her or to himself? These questions remained unanswered during the fortnight he spent in Paris; they were still the vital questions for him when Philip Rose arrived without warning at the hotel and brought the answer to them in his pocket.

The two men had not met for some weeks now—not in fact, since Quentin's departure for Cannes, and if the encounter were embarrassing, it was none the less welcome. In response to Quentin's earnest invitation, Philip declared that he would remain in Paris four-and-twenty hours—"as long as you will remain, my dear fellow, and perhaps longer." And when his words were received with blank incredulity, and a torrent of interro-

gation almost overwhelmed him, he husbanded his mystery and suggested dinner in the restaurant. Afterwards, over coffee and cigars in Quentin's private room, he began to be more explicit. News he certainly brought with him—amazing news.

"Alice is thinking of taking the Warren at Wargrave," he began quietly. "It is wise of her. Until this affair of yours is quite cleared up, it would never do to remain in town. We must rely upon a short memory and an accommodating generation, Quentin. The lady helps us to do that—but I will come to it presently. Your wife goes up the river until we can tell the whole story—our story, which will include the romance of an impostor and the end of a silly conspiracy. As to Lady Alcester's tears, she will dry them on banknotes, an excellent *mouchoir* if made on a decent scale. I am doing all I can to put a plausible story abroad and you must help me. I am sure we can weather it out if we go the right way to work. That does not include copy-book sentiments, my dear fellow —they have absolutely no place in the scheme."

Quentin listened impatiently. He would not be at the trouble to rebuke the naïve dishonesty of the course which Philip proposed. A "man of the world" might act thus toward a woman, he thought, and plume himself upon his cleverness. His own honesty, however, was almost boyish in its simplicity; he knew that no false story which impugned the name of Isabella Montanes would ever be put out in his name. But this was not the time to say so.

"There is no scheme as far as I am concerned," he rejoined with dignity. "If I can save Alice's honour by honourable means, it will be done. I am glad you came, Philip, because you must be my agent in the

matter. She has got strange ideas into her head ; they won't remain, of course, but they are there, and likely to be troublesome——"

"A question of her allowance, I suppose?"

"Exactly ; she has scruples about taking my money."

"Ah, I guessed it! The mother is not afflicted the same way—far from it. She has talked of nothing else for ten days or more."

"Then we must use her as our instrument. I don't quite know what's to be done, but I count upon you in the matter. There must be no more paltry school-mastering, Philip. I want you to be my agent. I will pay you a thousand pounds a year, and your chief occupation will be to see that Alice wants for nothing, and lives as her position entitles her to live. A clever man will find a way. Poverty is too hard a road for women to tread when an alternative is offered them. Their codes of life are accommodating—I do not say it cynically ; the best news you could bring me would be Alice's compliance with my wishes."

Philip remained silent a little while, dwelling upon the offer just made to him. He could not altogether share his friend's optimism, and he knew how difficult women can be when obstinacy colours their logic.

"Well," he said at length, "I shall do what I can, but I scarcely see eye to eye with you in this, Quentin. Your offer to me is very generous. I can't quite speak about it to-night. Then, again, you will not be long in America, I feel sure of it. The whole business there may not keep you a month."

"What business do you refer to, Philip?"

"To this, Quentin."

He laid a yellow cablegram upon the table as he spoke, and Quentin understood at once that it had

reached him from New York quite recently. The message was altogether unambiguous:—

"Let my husband come to me and I will give him his freedom.—MONTANES, Hôtel Druot."

Quentin read the telegram many times before he laid the paper down, and Philip watched him across the table with that close scrutiny which seeks to read a human soul. Did he understand now the character of the woman for whom he had been willing to sacrifice all that was best in his life? Philip could not tell. The face was inscrutable though the eyes shone with a deeper lustre and a flush of colour came to the pale cheeks.

"When did you receive this, Philip?"

"In town at ten o'clock last night. It came through a firm of inquiry agents—Rawdon, Carr, and Clerk."

"It was good of you to bring it to me. She must have sailed from Havre two days after the trial. I shall go to her, of course."

"Of course you will, and return to us in a month's time—yes, to your wife and home, Quentin."

"God grant it, Philip."

He took the paper up again and read it with avidity. What did it mean? Would this woman tell him of her own sins, or would she sell herself for money, saying, "Pay me, and I will make your freedom possible." The possibility, the excitment of it terrified him.

"God grant it!" he cried again, and Philip echoed the prayer.

* * * * *

And so Philip proved a true prophet, and the first steamer carried his friend to New York, while he, himself, welcoming his errand, hurried to London to befriend one who needed friendship so sorely.

BOOK III

THE QUEST

CHAPTER XXVI

LADY DICKY GIVES A LUNCHEON PARTY

THE decadence of womanhood as typified in the liberties permitted to the twentieth-century spinster is a favourite subject with those whom the splendid Dean has styled "wild curates." These recite for us many of the follies of a sinful age which finds its young women superbly contemptuous of chaperons and not a little prone to imitate their American sisters in all that concerns their individual liberty. Though a dozen years have scarcely passed since fashion declared it improper for an unprotected female to ride alone in a hansom cab, the young women of our time are already wearying of the secrecy of the motor-car and sighing for some new disguise. In the club, in the restaurant, in the theatre those of "tender years" declare to us their merits as hostesses. Man lunches with woman and tells her that her cigars are good, and her wines sufficiently "dry." The wild curate in vain addresses himself to the unoffending cushion, and cries that the

chariots of the devil are passing by. There is not one luncher the less at Prince's, one cup left dry at the club because of him—and, all said and done, our morals, may be, are neither better nor worse than those of a sleek-tongued generation which shuffled in crinolines and declared Anthony Trollope immoral.

Lady Dicky was very fond of little luncheon parties given, as she put it classically, "entirely upon her own." Rarely a week passed that she did not entertain Lady Bill and Lady May, with Mrs. That and the Honourable Mr. Something at one or other of the fashionable restaurants in the Strand or Piccadilly. Her "teas" at the Empress Club were widely known for the gaiety of the company and the number of the slanders to which they gave birth. *Blasé* young men ate Dicky's anchovy sandwiches and asked each other (when they left her) if any ass would ever marry her. Old men said that she was a wicked little devil, but they did not stop away; sportsmen remembered that she could ride, bridgers that she played a decent hand. Every one saw that she would make a fine hostess some day—when she could find a victim who could offer his name and his fortune in return for those peculiar qualities which are esteemed in the world of smartness. It remained for the amiable Lady Anne to remark that no one seemed in any particular hurry to take advantage of these opportunities. The girl with a past is rarely a woman with a future, she very kindly said.

Lady Dick never minded very much what old Lady Anne did or did not say about her, and she used to avenge herself by asking the spiteful dame to her parties and seating her just out of ear-shot of her favourite man. One such party she gave in the second week of the May following Quentin's departure for

America; and to this the indispensable Lady Bill, the volatile Lady May, General Oscar, and Philip Rose were invited, as well as the Lady Anne with Bobby Fenton and several youths more remarkable for the length of their necks than the breadth of their heads. It was a gay function, sparkling with memorable talk in which certain phrases not understood of the common people passed current for delicious wit; and if it concerned the court presided over by Sir Francis Jeune more frequently than that of St. James, well, as Dicky said, "one must talk about something." Nor was anything more natural than that Quentin Caird's wife should be discussed with animation seeing that Philip Rose was among the guests and General Oscar had just come from Lady Alcester's flat.

Lady Bill began it; she generally opened up unpleasant subjects, as one of the "long necks" delighted to tell her. Chancing to speak of her morning's recreation, she made the delightful admission that she had just seen the Lady Alice's sister, Ellen, coming out of church. Here was something which set the tongues wagging with a vengeance—give them their due, there was not a single bigot among the "long necks."

"She goes there every morning," remarked the Lady May. "Mr. Hurry, the curate, reads Matins to her, and then, I suppose, they spoon in the vestry."

"For shame, my dear," said the Lady Anne, "I have found Mr. Hurry a most amiable young man. He always puts my name on the subscription lists, and never asks me for the money. Do you know, I am one of the vice-presidents of the Society for Converting the Turks."

"That's why she always begins with young Jeffery," whispered a "long neck" to Lady Bill.

Philip Rose, however, chimed in a little seriously—

"If the girl is going to marry a curate, I suppose she's wise to go in training for the race," said he. "Besides, they may be practising that touching hymn 'Oh, Perfect Love!' I notice that it is generally chosen when a man of sixty-three marries a girl of twenty. The Church has an ear for the peculiarly appropriate."

"Yes, appropriation is certainly in their line," said General Oscar, as he devoted himself assiduously to the *pâté de foie gras*. No one, however, took the point up, and so Lady Dicky chimed in—

"Is it true that Alice is going to take a place at Wargrave, Philip? I met Father Dominic yesterday, and he said he had heard it."

"It is perfectly true," said Philip; "she has got the Sevingtons' place for the rest of the year."

"She's wise!" exclaimed Lady Anne. "Until the divorce is tried she's better out of the way. Heaven forbid that I should judge a fellow-creature, but we want time to forget, my dear."

"To forget what, Lady Anne?"

"That her marriage is scarcely *en régle* as things go."

Philip Rose asked her the question and heard her answer with some indignation.

"You are speaking of one of the best women in London," he said shortly, "and you know perfectly well there cannot be such a thing as a divorce since Quentin Caird was never her husband."

"My dear friend," said the old lady, "we none of us know anything. That's the mischief. She goes to church with this man and then spends his money. You tell us he has a wife living—do you expect us at the same time to introduce her to our daughters?"

"I do not suppose she would desire the pleasure of their acquaintance," retorted Philip hotly. Nothing, however, disturbed the cat-like old lady's equanimity.

"I'm glad to hear it's not to come into court," she said blandly; "if she is wise enough to keep out of the way we shall forget whether she divorced him or he divorced her. Our memories are fortunately short. I myself made the most ridiculous mistake yesterday. I actually bowed to that Dartley woman; not until her brougham had passed did I remember the Homburg affair and old Dartley's decree. Well, I hope my bow did her good. I'm sure she's welcome to it."

Bobby Fenton ventured to suggest that some social code should be invented by which a bow could be recalled—cancelled and made of no account, as a presentation at Buckingham Palace which is annulled; but this failing to find much support or any profitable suggestion, old General Oscar took up the discussion and defended the absent woman warmly.

"It's the most cruel case within my experience," he said; "and the odd thing about it is that you cannot put the blame on either of them. Caird seems to have been convinced of his first wife's death—the French papers reported it, and he received an official certificate. Alice knew that he had been married, but what woman would have asked for proofs. She accepted the story of a man who loved her, and never dreamed that anything lay behind it. So far as I can learn, they have decided to separate, at least until the best of it or the worst of it is known. It's the only course and the right course, and she is entitled to the sympathy of every honest man——"

"To say nothing of every honest woman," remarked Lady Bill.

Lady Anne held her aristocratic nose very high in the air while the General was speaking, but Lady Bill's flippancy brought her in again.

"Is there an honest woman where another woman is concerned?" she asked, and then she said ironically, "Let us see this paragon; I'll present her myself."

"You don't believe in your sex, then?" asked Oscar, a little scornfully.

"I know too much about it, General."

"But you are really sorry for Alice Caird?"

"Why should I be? The man came in for eight hundred thousand pounds three years ago."

"She doesn't mean to touch it," said Philip quickly; "she's determined about that."

"Ha," sniffed the old lady, "wait till her bills come in! These heroics don't touch me—if she takes his money she's compromised, and if she leaves it she's a fool!"

"Your philosophy seems to have no *via media*, Lady Anne," remarked an Oxford boy.

She turned on him with maternal pity.

"The *via media* never gets into the halfpenny papers," she said magnificently; "it is not preached about from pulpits. Let the girl find a man who'll marry her. There are always fools ready to correct another man's mistake."

"If I know anything of Alice she is too devoted to Quentin Caird to do anything so wise," said Lady Dicky, and then argumentatively she stated the case for her friend.

"What's it matter, anyway? We none of us really care. Are you very upset about it, General? Do you mean to stay away from Hurlingham to-day because Mr. Caird has a Spanish wife? I'm sure you

don't—you wouldn't weep a single tear if he had twenty."

"My dear," said the General in a low voice, "few of us are so lucky."

The conversation, it was admitted afterwards, had become distinctly lively, and no one knew quite what old Lady Anne's acerbities would lead to. The plain truth of it was that this sour-tongued dame by no means lacked heart, and she fired off her sallies as freely at her friends as her enemies. A woman of much common-sense, she did not altogether lack sympathy, and just at the moment when every one expected that she would egg on Philip Rose to some violent outbreak, she astonished the company by asking him if Alice had already left for Wargrave.

"They tell me she is with her mother at a flat in St. James's Court," she said. "People really ought to register their addresses since we all live in somebody else's house nowadays. I thought Lady Alcester was still in John Street."

"She cannot afford to live there any longer," Philip said.

"And so she takes a flat at twice the rent? Well, I'm glad to know, for I mean to call upon her to-day."

The intimation fell like a thunderbolt — it nearly choked Lady Dicky, who was drinking *crême de menthe* through a straw.

"To do what?" she exclaimed.

"To call upon a good little woman," said the old lady.

"Now that's really kind of you," said Philip Rose with real meaning; and then he explained—"people seem so foolish about it. It's such an odd case. Nobody blames her, and yet her friends stand back. I'm glad

to be able to tell you that she has determined to make no claim upon Caird. There can be no further publicity—the marriage was no marriage, and unless she means to find another husband, it's unnecessary to ask the court to declare it invalid. On my part, I am quite unable to advise her. If I told her honestly what I felt, I should say marry again! But you see Caird is my friend, and it may yet be proved that this Spanish woman is merely an adventuress. I don't think she's that myself, but there's the chance; and he has gone to America to see what he can make of it. A less honest man might have nipped the whole thing in the bud at the beginning. Money, perhaps, would have done it—I can't say, but I think it's the duty of Alice's friends to rally round her, and I shall be very surprised if the best of them do not."

He addressed himself to all those at the table who knew Alice Caird, and the response to a new note of earnestness astonished him.

"We'll all go, this very afternoon," said Dicky decisively.

"Now, this instant," said Lady Bill; "I feel so good."

"We shall get our reward in the other world if not in this!" cried Lady May, with downcast eyes.

But Lady Anne rose majestically.

"Call the keepers," she said; "the animals are escaping."

CHAPTER XXVII

OUT OF THE WRECK

It is scarcely necessary to say that the interesting quartette did not find the Lady Alice at home. A stately servant at St. James's Court answered them in that far-away voice which conceals instruction that her ladyship was out, and his manner denoted that long days might pass and still find her in the unknown land of the domestic subterfuge. Nevertheless, he told the truth, such as it was, for Alice was then at Abingdon, in a convent of English Benedictines, and none, not even her complaining mother, knew when she would return. If any word of wisdom were spoken, it was a coarse word uttered by Percival, the Earl. "She'll soon chuck piety," he said gracefully—and those who knew Alice best did not doubt but that he was right.

Now, here was one, little more than a girl, who had crossed a lonely valley of shame and had owned it bravely and with abiding courage. Whatever stupefaction attended the first discovery of her true position, however profound were the depths of despair, anger, defiance, and abject suffering into which the tragedy plunged her, the resurrection of her womanhood and her courage were sure. She was not conscious of it herself—believed, perhaps, that to the end of her days

the atrophy of heart and intellect would endure until sensibility perished, and death robbed her of the burden. But those who watched her closely, and Philip Rose rarely permitted a day to pass that he did not visit her, perceived the unmistakable growth of a better resolution ; a power to resist which hitherto had been lacking—above all, a real contempt for the judgment a corrupt society had passed upon her. Quentin had left her now ; she did not expect him to return. Her own life had been a tragedy, the tragedy of accident which she could not avert. It remained to gather up the threads again, to begin anew, to try and save something from the *débâcle*. Herein Philip was her slave—heard her suggestions patiently, sympathised with her schemes, tried to comfort her always. And since they hold that pity is akin to love the task proved difficult enough. He loved her, had loved her from his boyhood up—and he must hear her soft musical voice, meet the gaze of her deep blue eyes, and touch her hand almost every day. Little wonder that he cursed the hour which made him Quentin's ambassador—the ambassador of a man who had left England, it might be for ever.

Philip did not know that Alice was going to visit the sisters at Abingdon. A week ago she had spoken of amazing plans whereof she would earn fortunes and establish herself as a commercial success in the heart of that West End over which she could no longer reign.

" I've thought it all out, Philip, and I mean to do it," she said in brighter tones than any he had heard since the fatal day of discovery. " You say I'm clever—well, if I am, what's the use of me here ? Old Lady Kenelham makes a fortune out of bonnets, why shouldn't I ? A shop in the West End, and just a saleswoman under

me, and there you are. I can buy the *dernier cri* in Paris and copy it here. There's a tremendous profit on hats, you know there is——"

Philip did not know it, but he nodded his head kindly, and tried to follow the details of this decorative scheme with a man's dull comprehension.

"Never having bought any hats, I must take your word for it, Alice," he said good-humouredly. "Have you thought about a shop—they're not so easy to get, are they? I'm told you have to pay a fortune merely for refusing one in the West End. Perhaps it isn't true—I hope so, for your sake."

She laughed at his ignorance.

"My dear Philip, you are the most persistent pessimist I have ever known. There, do you suppose I should want to do all this if I had not a shop in my mind——"

"Yes, yes, Alice, but have you a shop in a street?"

She turned appealing eyes towards him, and shrugged her shoulders prettily.

"Oh, if it is nothing to you, very well. I thought you would like to hear about it—that's all."

"Forgive me—I was never more interested. You are quite serious in this, Alice?"

"As serious as my Lord High Chancellor on the—yes, the woolsack. I mean to open a shop and make my fortune, Philip."

"Good—and the shop is situated?"

"Is situated just out of Hanover Square. What do you think of that?"

"I'll tell you when I am introduced. Do many 'hatters' hang up their signs in those parts?"

"There isn't one within a hundred yards. And they'll paint it any colour I like."

"It would depend upon the hats, wouldn't it? You

might have it painted every time you dress your window. A good background should be everything."

"Philip, you are intolerable to-day."

"Not at all—I am merely prudent. How much rent do they ask you for this treasure among emporiums?"

"Three hundred pounds to be paid every quarter day."

"Um—you'd want to sell a good many hats! Who'd make 'em, Alice?"

"I should, with these very fingers. Of course, I might want help."

"You'd have to pay for that?"

"Oh, next to nothing! That sort of person is not accustomed to high wages."

"No, poor devils, they are not. It would be something new for you to be in the sweating line."

"Philip——"

"Candidly, Alice, you would be in the Bankruptcy Court in six months. That's my opinion."

"Then what in Heaven's name is a woman to do? Would you have me sit down and starve?"

"I would have you be quite sensible. Go to Knowl and live there until Quentin comes back. You know that he wishes it."

He tempted her sorely, but her mind was made up as to that.

"I will do that when I am Quentin's wife," she said coldly.

"You are Quentin's wife in the sight of God and man now. Go to Knowl until he tells you that you are not."

She had been standing by the window during their talk, but she now came over and sat in a low chair by his side. Sorrow had not touched her beauty; rather

it gave her face an added suggestion of life and soul and quivering humanity. She wore a French dress purchased in Paris last May—a single stone diamond ring kept her wedding ring in place. Philip was glad to see that she still wore it. He feared sometimes that mad rebellion would fling it to the winds.

"Philip," she asked him earnestly, "has my mother been receiving money from Quentin?"

He met her gaze without flinching, and told her the truth.

"Lady Alcester has been doing what is wise, Alice."

"And Percival, has he been taking Quentin's money also?"

"Your brother has an open mind on the subject. His treasury is usually an embarrassment to him."

"He will ruin us," she said quickly. "Philip, don't you see that I cannot let him take Quentin's money?"

"Cannot—in God's name, why? Because he has unwillingly done you the greatest injury a man can do a woman. Is that it? Do you love him so little that you add this to his grief. Think what it would mean to him if I must write him and say, 'Your wife refuses her own—she refuses you!'"

"It is not my own, Philip. I am not his wife. If I accept his money I give every tongue the right to slander me. You know that I do."

He denied it indignantly.

"The tongue that slanders you deserves to be cut out, Alice. Good God, what an infamy! As if you had not suffered misfortune enough already. I don't believe there is a man or woman in London to-day who does not sympathise with you. How could they slander you? Was Quentin's mistake your act? You know that it wasn't; there is not one act of your life that

"Such moments as these were dreaded by Philip as the bitter fruit of his inheritance."

the world could blame. Why do you speak like this?"

"Because my heart is breaking, Philip."

She rose quickly and stifled a sob in her throat—but not before eloquent tears dropped on her cheek and the red lips quivered with suppressed emotion. Such moments as these were dreaded by Philip as the bitter fruit of his inheritance. What could he say to her; how tell her that his own heart bled for her, and that he would have given the best years of his life if by them she might find happiness. For here was one whom no home comforted, no loving hand encouraged, no hope sustained. Artificiality, greed, covetousness surrounded her. None reckoned her grief but with the added line of a personal loss. And the one who above all others should have shielded this fragile girl from the world of scornful judgment, the mother who bore her—she, loud above them all, raised her dolorous lament and proclaimed to greedy ears that her daughter had ruined her. Philip alone remained to pity in pitying silence. What could he do? What title had he to the *rôle* which Quentin had thrust upon him? His love for her! Yes, but therein lay the peril for them both; a peril which insisted that he must be a cold counsellor before ever he became a comforter, and suppressed at their birth those warmer instincts of friendship he would so gladly have fostered. A full understanding of this view left him dumb when fortitude deserted her; but honour forbade him to respond. He did not dare to say, "I understand; Alice, I pity you."

"We are coming to the darkest cloud, Alice," he replied after a painful moment of silence. "I feel sure that Quentin will have good news to write before long. When did you last hear from him?"

"He wrote from New York fifteen days ago. He was then on his way to Chicago. It was a terrible letter, Philip."

"Terrible in what sense?"

"In the sense that he makes me understand him—I never quite did that before. He was always a silent man; one felt that he wished to speak of intimate things, but could not express himself. I know now what it was—his secret is a very old one, Philip. Do you know that he saw this woman in Paris just after he was married?"

"I don't think he told me that, Alice."

"No, perhaps he would have suffered less if he had. But it is true. He saw her at one of the theatres, and didn't believe his own eyes. He told me that he used to dream of it for months afterwards—it stultified his life; he had such great schemes when we were married, and this paralysed them all—I think it made him cold and reserved even toward me. Naturally I resented it, and tried to find my friends elsewhere. It's the story of many a marriage, Philip—the parting of the ways because neither will speak, and silence is so much easier."

"True, a word in the right place is so often the keystone of two lives. I never doubted Quentin's love for you, but I shall doubt yours for him if you do not act as he wishes."

"That is to say, if I do not continue to live upon him when I have no claim to do so."

"Nonsense, you have every claim—moral and actual. There is not a man in London who would not decry him as a scoundrel if he did not do what he is doing. If you go to Knowl and live quietly there, people will say you have done the right thing."

"I don't care what people say, Philip."

"Oh, yes, you do! We all do. Those who protest the most, fear the most. If you did not care for public opinion you would despise this story, and ignore it. Quentin would never have gone to America, and London would have called the Spanish woman an adventuress. Your logic is hopelessly bad. You compel your husband to suffer and then tell me that you love him. I can't believe it, Alice."

She could not answer this, although she clung to the root idea tenaciously, and would give him no promise to go to Knowl. That her mother and her brother were both tacitly receiving Quentin's money had long been patent to her; and in so far as this quieted their reproaches she welcomed it, although it emphasised the falseness of her own position. Here she was in this substantial flat, the gaiety of London running all about her, without prospect, plan, or pleasure, yet she had not the will to alter things, or to decide upon any fixed course to say it shall be this. Philip, in his turn, believed that time would assist him—time, the healer—time, the foe of memory and regrets.

"I shall come every day for my answer," he said that morning when he left her. "It will be splendid news for Quentin, and, of course, I shall cable it. Don't keep him waiting long, Alice. He is very much alone, believe me."

"And I, Philip, am not I alone?"

"Yes, yes," he said, "but you have many friends, Alice. Why do you keep away from them?"

"Oh, don't speak of that!" she cried passionately. "God knows what it means to me to see a face now—any face but yours, Philip."

"Then you shall see it often, and we will make

Quentin happy, Alice. Goodbye, and God bless you! There will be better news for me to-morrow."

"Never, Philip!" she exclaimed, almost with anger. "I shall never touch his money now—never to my life's end."

"Ah," he said, "your heart will speak by and by, and then it will be another story, Alice."

He left her upon this; and when he had gone she stood for many minutes by the window, watching the court below, and the busy people passing there.

The gates of this busy world had shut upon her indeed; her sense of isolation and utter loneliness left this truth supreme beyond all others.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SAINTS AND OTHERS

THE fit of depression lasted for a full hour, an hour big with gloom and foreboding and that introspective anger which is the twin brother of obstinacy. Alice knew perfectly well that her resolution was merely temper, but she did not swerve from it a hair's-breadth. Never, until the law recognised her as Quentin Caird's wife, would she take his money—here was something to build upon, but no sooner had the first brick been laid than an imp of evasion came whispering in her ear that sacrifice need not necessarily be seclusion, and that if she could not have Quentin's money, there was no possible argument against her having liberty. A desire to be up and about possessed her for the first time since Quentin had left her. Animosity against those who judged her provoked the determination to see them and defy them. Why should she remain in this gloomy house—her ponies, her own ponies, were at her disposal if obstinacy would bend before reason and anger give place to courage. The idea no sooner came to her than it was acted upon. That very afternoon, to old Lady Alcester's extreme joy and the blank astonishment of the Achilles company, she drove in Hyde Park, was seen and smiled upon by the men, even recognised stiffly by some of the women. Be sure that many a

dinner-table discussed her before the soup chilled in the plates; and that those who were least remarkable for their practice of the elementary virtues were the loudest in condemnation of her lack of them.

"Audacious—impudent—a try on—so soon too—and the man with his real wife in America—they say she's living on his money—the Earl ought to have been in the Bankruptcy Court long ago—what next, I wonder?" —and so on, and so on.

Alice could see substantial lips pouting such words as these while she drove her ponies by the lawn and recognised acquaintances new and old. The inimitable trio, Lady Dicky, Lady Bill, and Lady May, were not in evidence; nor was that knightly cavalier, Bobby Fenton, making the drive reek with his obstinate motor-car; but she detected Mr. Danby, the Cabinet Minister, lounging with his sister in his victoria, and his bow was both gracious and sincere.

"Men forgive everything to a woman who has done another man an injury," she thought; and, driving on, she presently met old Lady Westerham, stiff as a poker in her fabulous barouche, and looking the type of fifty generations moulded and cast into an automaton of lace and feathers, and betraying a skin which the winds of time had sadly withered. Here was one who had been Alice's guest at Knowl in the winter, but the great dame drove by as though sight were denied to her, and not a muscle of the starched cheek twitched while the deed was done.

"Cat!" said Alice—audibly now, so that the groom behind her smiled to himself and reflected upon the precise term he would have employed in similar circumstances. The servants were devoted to Alice—she had to turn some of them away almost by the shoulders.

From that moment it became an exacting pilgrimage, uncertainty at every shrine, and sometimes not a little humorous. Thus, while Mr. Danby, the Cabinet Minister, beamed upon Alice every time his carriage passed hers, his sister recalled skilfully the concession of recognition until she finally turned away her head directly the ponies warned her that Alice passed. Old Lady Deerham nodded with condescending familiarity —that old woman had schemed and schemed to get upon the Knowl visiting list, and here was a precious moment for her. Mrs. Polach, the Bishop of Winchelsea's wife, smiled in a very kindly way—the Elsen girls declared their willingness to forget and to forgive— Gwen and Carrie nodded with their noses in the air while Edna looked at Alice a little pathetically. Further on stood Colonel Dene, who doffed his hat with a magnificent sweep as who should say, " I embrace them all with gallant toleration." And so the pantomime went on and there were mighty whisperings everywhere and rumour of rumours—upon this side that a divorce had already been arranged ; upon that dark hints of a tragic story untold, and of great names that were being concealed.

What tragedy of our social life is there, what blighting scandal, what ruin and desolation to which the lying tongue of rumour does not add this story of a name concealed ! And this, maybe, is the greatest infamy of them all.

To say that Alice's experiment in any way reassured her would be to misrepresent the circumstances. Whatever outward token of kindly recognition she received, the fact that people were uncertain about her remained ; and could not but be galling to a woman of sensitive spirit and early victories. Last year they had named

her as a new and very brilliant planet in the social firmament, moving in a well-defined and regular orbit, and easily to be placed by the critical telescope for the years to come. Success came easily, and was scarcely appraised at its just value. She had triumphed everywhere, triumphed by her beauty, her wit, and her money —and triumphing she lifted her family from the slough of poverty and scorn, and re-established those traditions which lack of means alone had tarnished. And now, at a word, she was cast out again ; the old jibes could be heard once more, the old difficulties remembered. The bitterness of it was so great, the humiliation so deep that more than once despair asked her why she continued to live. To this vivacity and vitality answered emphatically—because there is the will, the will which defies, the will which conquers. And such thoughts as these carried her triumphantly upon her pilgrimage. She checked resentment successfully, and an ignorant observer would have praised her "dash" and buoyancy. Even Father Dominic, the priest, who came almost face to face with her near the Achilles statue, thought her wonderfully recovered and but little changed from the charming woman he had known last year. "My dear lady," he said, as she reined in her ponies at once and drove up to the kerb to talk with him, "so you have not gone to Abingdon, after all?"

Many a time and often had he suggested to her that what she needed was rest, and with rest the recuperation of heart and intellect and courage. The English sisterhood he had founded near Abingdon would offer this child of fate a sure refuge, alike from the contumely of the world and from the hardships which quixotic sacrifice might put upon her. Alice invariably replied that she was not religious—not in that sense. "I hate

churches," she once said to him. He shook his head, but would not stoop to cant.

"Yes," she said a little ruefully on this particular afternoon, "I suppose I am still in London, Mr. Lister —but I can't be quite sure about anything nowadays."

"Ah, just what I expected—you refuse the medicine and then quarrel with the doctor. My dear child, I have thought about you so much lately, so very much. Why have you not let me hear of you?"

"Because I don't want any one to hear of me. I would like to become invisible, like the man in Mr. Wells's novel. You haven't read it, so you don't know. Of course you don't read any novels?"

"I read them all and live," he said sadly. And then, coming nearer to the carriage, he asked—"What is Mr. Caird doing—have you heard from him?"

"He is in America," she answered, with a flush. "I believe he has gone to Chicago; his letters are very vague—he seems afraid to write to me."

"He is not afraid—a man who does his duty never is. The end of it will be well, my child—the end of all things is well if they are properly begun. I have no doubts; I want you to have none. You should have made me happy and gone to Abingdon. I am sure all this does not interest you now."

"It bores me indescribably," she said, a little impatiently; "I'm like an actress looking at a play—and some one else is in my part. Can't you understand it? I feel that it's all passing by me, and I shall never go with the stream again."

"You at least have the consolations of sacrifice."

"None—not one. I have not even the consolation of wanting to be good. I hate everybody, and I want everybody to hate me."

"Go to Abingdon and rest," he said; "give the windows of your life a little air and clear the mists from them. You live in the fog of habit here. Get out of it and find the sunshine. I know what is best for you, for I, too, have a story to tell."

A shadow crossed his face, and she, with her quick wit, perceived that there had been in his own life some such tragedy as had stricken hers. A great compassion for him occupied for the moment the dwelling-house of her sorrow. She fell to wondering if he, too, had loved.

"And yet you never rest, Mr. Lister," she said, after a constrained pause.

"Because the windows of my life are clear as yours will be by and by. I shall write again to-night and tell the sisters you are going. They will make you very happy at Abingdon."

"Then miracles won't be dead," she replied, brightening suddenly as old Lady Westerham passed her. "Goodbye, Mr. Lister; it's so kind of you, but we mustn't have a scandal. My dearest friend, Lady Westerham, is over there. She would do me an injury if she could. Now, isn't it sweet of her, but I shall fly to Abingdon—perhaps."

He smiled softly.

"A woman's 'perhaps' has helped to fill purgatory," he said.

* * * * *

But Alice went to Abingdon all the same.

That very night, at nine o'clock, when dinner was done and old General Oscar had taken the wasp-waisted Lady Alcester to the theatre (he cursed all the way in the cab which carried him to St. James's Court); when Ellen, her elder sister, helped the amiable Joshua Hurry, her lover, to prepare the forthcoming number of the

Parish Magazine, one of those uncontrollable impulses which are among the most charming characteristics of a woman's caprice put it into her head that she would really like to go to Abingdon and declare herself to the astonished sisters without any further warning whatsoever. And no sooner was this twentieth-century idea conceived than it was acted upon. As Quentin had left her his stables, so had he left her his garage and his chauffeurs. Away, then, went a footman in quest of the indispensable Johnson, and, being lucky enough to find him in the very act of sallying forth to see the new ballet at the Alhambra, he bade him hurry to the shed and bring out the car. This was a new carriage ordered last season, but not delivered until the very eve of the tragedy. The makers promised that it could go sixty miles an hour—Johnson declared that performance went beyond this, and he had driven the Brooke a mile in fifty-five seconds. The very thing to serve a woman's whim when sober decision refused to help her.

Alice changed her dress quickly when she heard that the car was at her disposal, and slipping on a tailor-made gown of substantial tweed with her heavy winter motoring coat and its attendant cap and veil, she caused her maid to pack a light dressing-bag, and so armed she quitted St. James's Court with profound satisfaction. At least she would find fresh faces, hear other talk than that of her own woes, and breathe the wholesome air of pretty Oxfordshire. To this content and expectation of a mild adventure a warm night of a friendly May lent its starry countenance. Even in Victoria Street there was a span of radiant sky far above them to promise moonlight in the country, and as they drove through the park the soft perfume of budding summer, the clear, sweet air, and the cloudless heaven foretold

a splendid run. In the Bayswater Road again they plunged once more into the vortex of bewildering traffic, but the silent monster threaded its way like a patient horse waiting for the word; and anon they passed by Acton and the Ealing tram-lines, thence at a brisker pace to Uxbridge and the great Oxford Road. The engine thrilled now as with human delight of speed and victory. She sang musically in harmonious rhythm the eternal epic of passage; the panorama changed from minute to minute, now showing the shuttered town and the lonely sentinels of silent houses; again the moonlit fields, the white winding way devoured by those ominous wheels. Ever before them was the blending beam of the Bleriot lamps, focussed to one radiant volume of searching light which showed the road more clearly than day ever showed it, for the shadows were deep upon its border, and the track itself revealed every ridge and hollow, even the very stones which lay upon it. In such a light the great car plunged onward, darting by the laggard carts, scaring the bewildered tramp from his early bed, sending the birds whirring from the trees. And mystery seemed to follow it. The belated wayfarer who drew aside, shielding his eyes from the tremendous beams, might have well believed that the crouching figure of the chauffeur was not human. The Brooke dwelt but a minute in his imagination, then passed as a whirlwind of fire and life, northward to the unknown.

There was no safer driver in London than Johnson, Quentin's chief of chauffeurs; but had he been less prudent Alice would not have complained. This swift flight by night attuned itself so perfectly to her own mind; seemed almost to carry her upon gentle wings

above that abyss of time upon whose further shore finality stood. Dreaming under the spell, she could believe that she pursued her own fate to drag an answer from it—whether her future must be one hidden from the world she had known or lived before that world in new victories. Activity now must be her friend, she thought, and she was almost of the mind to tell Johnson to keep straight on, to pass the towns and cities by in the quest of that change whereby memory could be hushed. It was nothing more than caprice, of course, and she did not speak the word which would have substituted the deed; but entertaining it as one entertains secretly the greater joys of the imagination, she said that such a journey might be her refuge when this odd visit had been paid. Religion certainly had not carried her there, for her faith was formless, unemotional, and entirely uncontroversial; nor did a desire to rest now trouble her. She knew not what it was, and when the scattered lights of the town of Abingdon came to her view, the ridiculous impulsiveness of it all occurred to her so plainly that she laughed aloud at her thoughts. Immediately afterwards she became aware that the car had stopped, and that Johnson was talking to a round-faced policeman who patrolled the market-square of the quiet little river-side town. They could not be far off now.

"The Convent—how far to that, sergeant?" Johnson asked, to which the bluff response was—

"About two minutes in that thing. Go slap through the town and bear to your left. You'll see it on the hill, and find 'em abed, too."

"I never thought of that!" cried Alice, in new amazement. "I suppose they go to bed very early, sergeant?"

"That they do, miss, almost afore the candles are

lighted. They say there are rum goings on up there—folks singing in the middle of the night, and all that sort of thing. I can't say myself, not knowing; but I'd sooner sleep at the Queen's Hotel, if you'd give me my choice."

"My chauffeur will do that," said Alice quickly. "Will you please tell them. I think the sisters will forgive me for waking them. I hope so. And if they don't I can come back, you know," she added, with a pretty laugh.

The sergeant, gliding a smooth half-crown from one palm to the other, hoped, indeed, that he might repeat the process at an early date; and when he had directed them again the car disappeared noiselessly through the town, and before the allotted two minutes had passed it stood outside the high wall of the convent, and Johnson, the chauffeur, tugged at an iron bell-pull, which moved a deep, resonant bell to sound a veritable tocsin. It was now nearly twelve o'clock at night. The good sisters had been asleep since nine, and as they waked one by one candles could be seen flitting from window to window, and the shadows of black forms moving to the dread alarm. Who came? Who summoned them? Alice blushed for very shame of it when an old, decrepid gatekeeper crept out, lantern in hand, and asked their business.

"Oh," she said, "we lost our way"—the ground did not open and swallow her up, though it was holy ground—"I am Lady Alice Caird, and Mr. Lister sent me to see Sister Margaret."

"And a nice time of night to come waking honest folk, I must say! Don't you bring that thing in here—her'll explode, I'll warrant. Just you keep her where she be while I tell the ladies."

Alice laughed at the idea of it, and while she was laughing a window upon the first floor opened noiselessly, and a very sweet voice asked—

"Who is it? Who is there, Williams?"

"Young lady from London, sister. She do say she have an appointment with you——"

"An appointment? What is her name?"

Other voices were heard whispering that it certainly must be a burglar—the flaming lights, the purring car, the black darkness, the hooded sisters, added their glamour of mystery to a pretty scene. This home of holy peace was not accustomed to receive the visits of smart women in motor cars, especially when they came at midnight. Alice was making history at the convent, though she remained in blissful ignorance of the fact.

"I am Lady Alice Caird," she pleaded ruefully, speaking up to them from the gravelled drive. "Mr. Lister, that is, Father Dominic, asked me to come to you. I'm so sorry about it; we didn't think of the time at all. Shall we go back to the hotel? It's quite near, and it won't trouble us at all."

The same sweet voice replied that she must by no means go back to the hotel. A great bustling about ensued, the unbolting and unbarring of massive doors; figures appeared, silhouettes in an aureola of bright light, weary women awakened from a just sleep, but very willingly, since they believed this to be a work of mercy. For Alice, however, the scene had its limitations. She felt as one upon the threshold of a prison—Johnson became in that moment the representative of the world and humanity; she feared to let him go, and when she did so his instructions were precise.

"Go back to the hotel, but come first thing in the

morning," she said desperately. "Here are two pounds. I may be going back to-morrow, Johnson."

Johnson, busy with a long oil-can, said, "Yes, my lady." The convent door stood wide open, and with one affectionate glance back at the purring car, Alice passed in, and the gates closed upon her.

There were two of the sisters in the hall—one Sister Margaret, a sweet-faced woman perhaps of fifty years of age; the other, Sister Etheldreda, a short, sharp-faced lady, it might be of thirty years. They both wore the white habit of their Order, to which they added the irregularity of white woollen shawls wrapped about their shoulders. Now that they were awake and fully assured that no armed desperado sought an attack upon their entirely feminine sanctuary, they welcomed Alice cordially, for Father Dominic had already led them to anticipate her visit, and recommended her as one who sorely needed their sympathy.

"We had looked for you for some days," said Sister Margaret. "Father Dominic said that you would surprise us——"

"And I have done!" exclaimed Alice impulsively. "Oh, yes, it's really wicked to come like this. Do you know, I was saying 'Telegraph, telegraph!' all the way down Victoria Street. Then we nearly ran into a van opposite Victoria Station—you know what horrid nuisances those vans are when you are on the third speed with a throttled engine—and, of course, the telegram went clean out of my head. I do feel so miserable about it. It's just like asking a man to dinner, and forgetting he only drinks hock. Do I put you out very much? Please say so; please say something brutal to me."

In this she was not obliged. Her jargon might have

"You know what horrid nuisances those vans are when you are on the third speed with a throttled engine."

been Greek to the sympathetic women who heard her. They had looked for one in deep sorrow to be associated with sermons, emblems, *crêpe*, and the halting step, and the tears upon the cheek, but in lieu of this they were confronted by a pretty woman with a laugh upon her lips; a woman for the moment gowned by a smart West End tailor, whose motor had cost two thousand pounds, whose manner was that of a *terra incognita*, a land of fables beyond the ken of the saintly imagination. Surprise left them helpless; they did not even speak of spiritual comfort.

"Your room is quite prepared; they are lighting a fire there now. If you would like anything to eat——" Sister Margaret resumed.

"Not a thing," said Alice quickly. "But oh, I should like something warm—hot milk, or something like that. It's terribly cold motoring at night, and my poor little feet are icebergs. Do I trouble you very much? I promise you I'll go away to-morrow if I do."

Sister Margaret protested that it was no trouble at all, but the sour-faced lady said nothing as she glided away to fetch the milk. Alice would have given much for vulgar worldly comforts, even for the masculine whiskey and soda; but to ask for that, she thought, would be much like a request for the devil's punch-bowl, or a candle from the shrine of St. Gengulphus. So she went up to her room apologising all the time, and the sisters busied about her, and the fire roared up the wide chimney, and the milk was boiled and the bed turned down, and everything done as hospitable women alone can do it. A great clock struck one before they left her. The good souls; they knew nothing of night in a common way.

So Madame Impulse drew her chair to the fire, and seated thus with a great rug wrapped round her, and her feet upon the fender, she thought about it all. Peace, rest, holiness—they were all here in this great bare room, with the painted walls and the picture of St. Joseph and the emblems of a barren sanctity. Above her chimney she might read the rules of an admirable establishment :—

A.M.	
6.0	First dressing bell.
6.30	Second dressing bell.
7.0	Chapel.
7.30	Breakfast.
8.0	Recreation.
9.0	Assembly.

And so on. Alice groaned as she read it. What a farce her journey had been ; what a hopeless pursuit of the very one thing this sanctuary must deny her. Rest !

Where might she rest? Forget? Nay, she would remember, as she had never remembered in greater London, with its strong voice, its lights, its figures, its ceaseless care to hope recreated and the life newborn.

And so she slept, and the tears which none had seen by day wetted her pillow by night, and were unchecked until oblivion pitied her, and the sunshine of a new dawn fell softly upon her tired face.

CHAPTER XXIX

RENUNCIATION

It has been observed that the garden scenes of England are nowhere so subtle in the magic of delight as upon the banks of the Thames; where maturity comes at the zenith of spring, and the winter garment is flung aside while London is still wearing it. True, you must get upon the hill-tops to cheat the wreathing mists; and doleful stories are told by the rheumatics in the valleys; but let the good ground be found, and in all Europe there is nothing to better it. Here is a verdure saturated with the dewy showers which leave behind them a freshness of the air, a pleasure of respiration surpassed upon no mountain plateau; here the leaves are greener, florescence is more wonderful, the rose more odorous, the perfume of the mignonette more welcome, the note of the wood bird sweeter than in any garden which lacks the river for its playmate. And here, be sure, the windows stand wide open to the call of day, and the human voice responds willingly to Nature's summons.

A convent bell, clanging dismally, as though weary of its playmate, monotony, awoke Alice at six o'clock upon the morning following arrival at Abingdon. A nomadic habit had long since robbed her of that

sensation of awaking in a strange room which is the treasured experience of the untutored traveller; she did not, as the young traveller does, lie for many minutes wondering where she was or how she got there. The room refused to shape itself as a palace fabulous of sleep. She measured it at once in all its nakedness, and pronounced it to be dismal in its size, gloomy in its colouring, mere space girdled by monstrous walls and chromographic saints to bless her. At home she had been accustomed to wake in a nest of radiant blue and clinging silks and costly laces; thence to look out upon the harmony of panelled walls and painted ceiling, and that which a furniture dealer would style, "A unique suite of rare old Chippendale." There luxury bent the knee to her, and was often rebuffed; she had never given much thought to the meaning of luxury, or what its deprivation would imply, but here in this ward of holiness the contrasts were suggested more sharply. How could people live in such a room, she asked herself? Why did sanctity shine best in yellow ochre? Why were saintly gentlemen, who lived on pillars, invariably reproduced by the cheaper processes? Alice thought that if ever she became rich again she would found a convent on entirely original lines. It would be furnished by Gillows, the art decorations by Liberty, and the clocks from Paris; the pictures should be entirely modern, and the tea-cups of china; she would insist upon the Sisterhood giving a dance every month, and a garden party on holy days. This immensely novel idea was still entertaining her when some one knocked at the door, and upon her saying "Come in," Sister Margaret entered with a delicious cup of tea and bread and butter which would have shamed any she had ever seen in Park Lane.

"We are very early people here, my dear," the sister said, with that sweet smile none could resist, "you must not let us disturb you upon your first morning. Please understand that we do not expect our guests to do as we do. In London, I am sure, no one gets up at six o'clock."

"Indeed they do," said Alice, with a bright laugh. "At six o'clock in the evening. I know several men who do it—they sleep all day, you know, like the owls. I suppose it comes to the same thing if one gets used to it."

And then she said more gratefully—

"How good of you to trouble about me! Of course, I must get up. You would not have me for the horrible example, like the man at the Salvation Army meeting. What time do you breakfast, sister; is it very early?"

Sister Margaret replied that breakfast was at half-past seven; the late hour, she implied, being a concession to the guests of the convent. She went on to hint that there was a service in the chapel at seven o'clock for those who had grown accustomed to the place; but she explained that no traveller was expected to attend that, their desire being chiefly that this should be Liberty Hall for those it sheltered. "And Father Dominic," she said, "has told me how much you need rest, my dear."

Alice was very grateful to Father Dominic in that moment, but still more grateful to the establishment which did not compel her to be good at seven o'clock in the morning. She was quite aware now that this journey had been, so to speak, a ridiculous digression from that story of combat she must write to the end. Of all the women she knew she would have named herself first as the least likely patient for the sanctified

rest cure; and yet in some ways she was grateful for the momentary shelter of this oasis in the desert of tragedy. At least it diverted her thoughts and set her asking how she might get out of it, and what must be done when escape was decently possible. Had she consulted her own inclination a messenger would have been despatched then and there to Abingdon for Esquire Johnson and a forty-horse car, but gratitude demanded at least a measure of delay.

"How am I to get through the day?" she asked herself woefully. "What excuse can I make to them?" As she could think of none, she sipped her tea slowly, and lay listening to the thrush beneath her windows.

It was very new to her, this valley of the upper river, and she had known but little of its charm hitherto. Henley in regatta week, Cookham on Ascot Sunday, these, with an occasional week-end at a crowded house-party, represented the sum of her knowledge of river life; but at Abingdon the window of her room showed her a new picture; a picture of sweeping woods and meadows golden with the spring flowers, of pleasure gardens and bowers remote, and of old Thames himself winding away to Oxford town deserted but enchanting. The romance of it all appealed forcibly to her tired imagination. How one could rest here if the wand of desire were at hand to raise up the twentieth-century cottage, and to people it with the elect! Quiet days they would be, dreamy days to bridge the gulf of doubt; and living them, her own troubles might be in some part forgotten, the uncertainty more kind. These reflections assisted her to dress herself leisurely. She no longer regretted London, as one regrets no longer the house of one's misfortunes.

The nuns were singing Matins when her toilet had

been finished; and, finding no one in the great, cold hall below, Alice went out into the old pleasure garden, and there, amid the roses, she listened to the dirge-like music. There, too, Sister Margaret and the sour-faced Etheldreda joined her after a little while, and surprised her in the very act of plucking a little bouquet of crimson roses. She was not ashamed to be thus discovered, for she had already determined to leave a handsome present behind her at the convent; and she declared her treasure without excuse.

"I cannot resist them, sister," she said, without a shadow of a blush. "Now, don't you think there will be roses in paradise? We might quarrel over harps, but no one could hate roses."

Sister Margaret shook her head doubtfully. She, good woman, had profited by no faith in the material comforts of paradise; for her, as for the children, heaven was the place "up there," where you floated on ethereal vapours towards a kingdom of unceasing harps. The more practical Sister Etheldreda, nevertheless, observed the rose-bush a little ruefully, and could scarcely conceal her vexation.

"We grow the flowers for our altar," she said pointedly; "they are better cut with the scissors than broken off."

"To say nothing of the thorns," Alice rejoined.

And then, following Sister Margaret, she asked her with real interest—

"What did Mr. Lister say of me; what did he tell you about me?"

To this earnest request the reply was frank and entirely disingenuous. This sweet, simple woman had never concealed anything in all her life, and had nothing to conceal now.

"We never ask why our guests come to us," she said; "it is enough for us to know that we can help them. If they are weary, they come to us and rest; if they ask for hope, we try to speak of it; if they seek God we point the way. Some come to us as people go to their own doctors, but our medicine is for the soul. There are others whom worldly misfortune sends; we do not ask them what it is: our gates stand open to all whom life has driven out, but we never intrude upon their secrets. Those live and die with them."

Such was the confession of a good woman who had abandoned, long ago, a stately house and a refined home for this mission to the spiritually destitute. Her faith spoke of forgotten ages; the beauty of her character would insist upon recognition wherever duty called her. Alice, no less than others, felt the spell of it, and yet that spell was not unaccompanied by a latent irritation which, had it been awakened, might have proved nothing more than a sense of loyalty to her own ideas and faith in the very world from which the convent should have been a refuge.

"And these poor people," she said involuntarily, "do they remain with you long, sister? Do you find that rest helps them very much?"

"It helps those who ask help of God, my child—some have been here for years, some leave us quickly. Each chooses for herself as it is willed. Our task is to keep our doors open and to give our love. We can do no more—but what we can do that we do with all our hearts."

"Then your life is a life in common; you live together, and are all sisters."

"You shall see for yourself, my child. Here is the refectory; I will introduce you to our friends."

They had crossed the garden and come up to the western wing of the convent, and now they entered a long, low room wherein breakfast was spread, and some twenty sisters and guests were assembled. The latter, seven in number, had been garnered from many fields. There was a stockbroker's wife, the victim of notorious company frauds; a soldier's widow, who really had loved the man she mourned; two elderly sisters from Kensington, whosé uncle had been a bishop; the wife of a substantial Bayswater tradesman, who was then the "guest" of certain teetotallers in Kent; an author's sister, and a painter's daughter—these completed that heterogeneous assemblage. And nothing but Alice's saving sense of humour kept her from despair when she was introduced to it. Even here, in this holy of holies, some remembrance of the forgotten world intruded. Did not the tradesman's relict elbow the bishop's nieces in a determined effort to sit next to the Lady Alice Caird? And to hear the stockbroker's wife criticise the bacon was a complete lesson in the whole gospel of asceticism. Bayswater wishing to sip coffee with Park Lane! Surely that was an ancient story.

The meal dragged wearily, as long and as uninteresting as the widow's narration of her dead husband's military and domestic history. Not unnaturally, the elderly sisters of Kensington turned the conversation lightly to the topic of episcopacy, in which deans and canons, and even archdeacons, were included. Alice observed that the spiritual cure seemed to demand a general admission of misfortune, renunciation of the world, and a lingering curiosity to hear news of it. Especially did the draper's lady desire tidings of the King's health and of the last State concert at Buckingham Palace; while the author's had scarcely a good

word to say for any writer, living or dead, unless it were for Balzac, whom she read in translations. More wonderful still, nor by any means to be carped at, were the content and satisfaction with which the good nuns themselves regarded this assembled company. They beamed upon it and blessed it with many smiles. There, before them, sat the sevenfold work of mercy. How grateful they were for their opportunities—how they rejoiced in them. And when breakfast was done, with what circumspection they set about the appointed tasks. Would Alice care to paint, or to play, or to sew? They were a little astonished when, like many before her, she cared for none of these things.

"I shall go shopping in the village," she said, "and then walk a little way by the river. Do I break the rules, sister? Then please forgive me—I must telegraph to London, you know, for I haven't got even a hat-pin. Will you mind very much?"

Sister Margaret, whatever were her own views, at once admitted the immensity of the disaster which left her guest without a hat-pin, and she suggested vainly that one of the others should accompany the victim of this misfortune. Alice breathed more freely when she stood once more upon the King's high road. The gloomy building behind her might have been a veritable cavern of despair. Quickly, and with good spirit, she set out for Abingdon, and when she met Johnson, her esquire, she felt as though the smallest provocation would have led her to embrace him.

"Did you send my telegrams, Johnson? Is there any answer?" she asked, all in a breath.

Astonished, he handed her a yellow envelope.

"I was just bringing it up, my lady," he stammered in his confusion.

The wire was from Philip Rose—

"All arranged at Wargrave, if you care to go there. Am running down to-morrow.—PHILIP."

Surely it was a message from merciful Heaven itself!

"Get the car at once, Johnson!" she cried, her cheeks ablaze with excitement. "This place will kill me in three days. I shall send a telegram—please be quick, Johnson; I dare not tell them."

He touched his hat and ran back to the town. Ten minutes had not passed before the "forty-horse" was flying along the London road like a demon of the day.

Adieu, holiness! Adieu, blessed peace! Here was one who turned her back upon them ignominiously.

And the patient sisters waited patiently, and Sister Etheldreda scowled upon the roses, and Sister Margaret shook her saintly head in sorrow for the daughter who had fled from them.

It was the very day upon which Arthur Danby, the young Cabinet Minister, acting upon his doctor's orders, arrived at Henley town to rest and recuperate, as the papers said. He had rowed at Oxford, and owned the famous house which is cheek by jowl with Noble's! And he knew that Alice Caird had taken the Sevingcourts' place at Wargrave.

CHAPTER XXX

THE WARREN

THEY called the place the Warren, Heaven knows why, for it was a straightforward house enough, clematis-clad and regular, with a wide lawn sloping to the river, and rose-bushes upon either hand; a boat-house at the lawn's edge, and a view of Shiplake and "Tennyson's" church from its upper windows. Passing by upon the river, you remarked its flowers chiefly, and the greenness of its grass; or, by night, you caught a pretty picture of long French windows and shaded lamps, of a table bright with silver and glass, and of women's figures about it, and men's sometimes. Alice liked the place from the first; she was so absolutely the mistress of it—even Lady Alcester refused to tear herself away from town in June, and almost the only companion of her exile was little Edna Elsen, who had written sweetly, and been very willing to come. True, Lady Dicky, with Lady Bill, flung themselves upon Wargrave more than once at a week-end, rioting through Sunday in punts and canoes, and winning for the little house a reputation it scarce could wear with dignity. But, in the main, Edna stood for sisterhood to the mistress of the Warren; and these two together lived quiet days in shady backwaters, learning to love

the river and to rest upon its waters—even to forget that London existed and did not miss them. On rare occasions Philip Rose came down from town, and brought the news with him. It was noticed that he spoke of Quentin less and less as the weeks went by. His manner had become reserved and mysterious, and he treated Alice with a tenderness and regard she could never mistake. Not for a long while now had there been quite the old confidence between them; nor did Philip refer so often to the restoration of the old order and the temporary nature of the new. One of these visits Alice was destined long to remember. It was the second Saturday in June—a day of perfect summer. Philip brought Lady Alcester from town with him—carried her, indeed, as an unwilling captive; and arriving upon the heels of a brief warning, was surprised to find the politician Arthur Danby there to make an odd number of the party. He spoke of it to Alice on the lawn after dinner while her mother entertained the Minister with a highly graphic account of the latest Criterion farce.

"Danby is staying a long time at Henley, is he not?" Philip began, as though aimlessly. "The papers speak of it in town a little critically. He looks well enough to me—I suppose he hasn't told you what the trouble really is?"

They sat in the arbour by the boathouse while he spoke; idlers drifted by upon their way to Henley or Shiplake; a steam launch, with a crew of shouting beanfeasters, churned the water, and disappeared like an ugly blot upon a pretty scene. The open windows behind them showed crimson shades and soft lights and the relics of a dainty feast. But there was not light enough to permit Philip to read Alice's face when she

answered him; nor did the studied indifference of her note help him.

"Mr. Danby has had trouble with his eyes," she said; "the oculists forbade him to use them for six months—I think he means to resign; he has spoken of it more than once. He is rather reserved, as you know. Perhaps he is indifferent where newspapers are concerned. I should be if I were as clever as he, Philip."

"Then you think him clever? That's odd! All the women call that man a genius, and the only thing he has ever done in the House is his speech on the philosophy of education. I never thought myself that women cared twopence about education—certainly all the smart women want is enough French to say unpleasant things politely. It's Danby's dreaminess, I suppose, which does it. The man who looks unutterable things may be an unutterable fool; but if he keeps his mouth shut, he will pass for a Socrates. Danby stands for a new class, the cultured politician nursed by Oxford, and sent out to the world in his swaddling clothes. He's like a small boy with golden hair; the women pat him on the back and say, 'Oh, what a dear!' Now, isn't that true—don't you look at him in that light yourself?"

"If you mean that I have patted him on the back and called him a dear, you are quite wrong, Philip. I admit that he can be interesting. He sits upon a pillar, but does not pretend to be a saint. He is a cynic, but a generous one——"

"Oh, yes, one of the exceptions to Carlyle's thirty-seven million, principally fools. The class of man exactly. Picks your friends to pieces and then tries to put them together again. Isn't it that? I'd like to wager a new hat that he's discussing you and me

at this very moment. The man's laugh is enough—there's character in it ; all you want if you know the kind."

They listened a moment, and the laugh in question certainly did ring very pleasingly, and with a musical cadence which denotes command. Lady Alcester had just told her victim exactly what she thought of the late Minister of Locomotion, and Danby lingered upon her phrases with a philosopher's appreciation of masterly ineptitude. Listening to his laughter, Alice suddenly exclaimed—

"He was speaking of you yesterday, Philip."

"Then you saw him yesterday?"

"I see him every day—he punts up to lunch when he can."

"Convenient and comfortable! And what did he condescend to say about me?"

"That you were concrete of the best quality."

"Flattering, I must say."

"You make an excellent foundation for other men's happiness. You will never build your own house, he says, because your habits are set."

"These bricklayer's similes are quite scholarly."

"Oh, but he means it kindly! He likes you very much. You are immensely clever, he says, but chance tossed you up in the wrong blanket. It's all chance, isn't it? And some of us fall on the floor, and some stick to the ceiling, and some of us neither go up nor down, and are just splendid mediocrities. Mr. Danby is frank because he believes that you could still make a great career for yourself, Philip—that's why I tell you everything."

"Mr. Danby is evidently a man of discernment—he lays his bricks with a silver trowel, Alice. Shall I be just as brutal, and tell you what I think?"

"Of course—I expect you to."

"Then I should ask him, if I were you, to punt down stream sometimes."

She opened her eyes widely.

"Oh—then you disapprove of him?"

"No, but I don't think Quentin cares much about politics."

She thought upon it a minute with set lips and flashing eyes.

"Philip," she said at last, "do you quite understand how very ridiculous it is?"

"I understand perfectly. Most things in life have a ridiculous side, even the gravest. Let's be as frank as boy and girl in a nursery. This man is devoted to you—he shows it every time he passes you the salt. It was just the same at Knowl—until he fell off his horse, and ridicule ran after him. I didn't say anything then because Quentin was there, and it was his business, not mine. It's different now. I am the steward of Quentin's interests, and I say that aquatics do not help them—just that, and nothing more. To a clever woman, it's enough. Let him go back to London—I think he could see the road if he tried."

Alice affected to laugh, but she hesitated to reply to him. Where another woman might have found him rude and brutal, she quite understood how largely his own feelings dictated this outburst. Dear Philip was jealous once more—his own eyes played Iago for him these many days, and an old passion she believed to be dead and buried fanned itself into a flame in this wind of rivalry. Quentin's interests scarcely could have justified such a crude confession. She had a great tenderness towards Philip, and this helped her to an attitude both critical and judicious.

"I am not Mr. Danby's keeper," she said, after a constrained pause, "and, of course, it is all very silly Philip. This place is not quite such a paradise that I am willing to banish my few friends from it. I know, of course, that you would like to lock me up in a strong-room until Quentin comes back; but you must think of me sometimes in the matter. Here I am, an outcast whom nobody wants, not even the man I love; and because I have suffered much I am to suffer more, and pretend that I like it. Some of you, perhaps, would like me to take the veil—I tried that at Abingdon, you know, before I came here. But I'm not religious, and I'm not patient, and I rebel against sacrifice. Why shouldn't I—it is better to be true to one's instincts of life than to pass as a martyr who would like to kiss the stake. I hate stakes, my dear Philip—there is not one grain of the saint in all my poor little body. That's what I told Quentin when he married me—it's the world and the flesh, and when I'm in a temper, well, then it's all of them. I don't think he would be much distressed—indeed, I shall write and tell him that Mr. Danby is here."

"Where will you write to?"

"To the Palace Hotel, San Francisco."

"Did you receive letters from there?"

"I received one. It was a dreadful letter, Philip."

"You mean that he promised nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing! It was just a list of questions. Was I well, rich, happy, contented? Not a word about himself or his wife."

"For Heaven's sake, don't talk like that, Alice!"

"Why not? Isn't it honest? Why should you and I tell untruths to each other. She is his wife, and I am a free woman."

"Good God! you don't really believe yourself to be so?"

"I should be a child if I did not."

"Then you are contemplating a different future?"

"Every woman contemplates a different future—every unmarried woman, Philip."

"If I did not know that it was just a little whiff of temper, I should begin to preach to you."

"Please don't; preach to mother instead. I'm sure that unhappy man would be grateful to you."

"I understand perfectly—we are to change about like the couples on the stage. Well, I shall go to bed instead. I'm very tired, and your nonsense makes me angry."

"It would make Mr. Danby my slave for ever," she said, rising with him.

Philip looked at her with devoted eyes. How bravely she acted in these bitter days, he thought. And then even to him there came this thought—that marriage with such a man as Danby might rehabilitate her instantly in the eyes of the world, What right had he to forbid it? A letter which he had received that very morning—a letter which his hand touched every time he drew out his cigarette case—said emphatically, "You have no right whatever." By no code of honour or prudence could he justify that petty jealousy with which he visited Alice. In truth, she was, as she claimed to be, a free woman; and, if she chose to marry Arthur Danby to-morrow, none might gainsay her.

Philip bit a hole in the stem of his briar pipe before he went to bed that night. From his open window he could hear the shrill voice of Lady Alcester, who stood in earnest converse with her daughter.

"The mother will bring it about if she can," he said to himself; and then he exclaimed with an angry cry—

"What a fool—what a madman, to leave her to this!"

CHAPTER XXXI

"VERITAS NUNQUAM PERIT"

THE real truth was, of course, that Alice thought just as much of the Honourable Arthur Danby as of the equally honourable laburnum-tree in the garden before her windows. The man amused her—he was an amiable talker, and he could pull a decent oar in a randan. She imagined that he might be, in some shadowy way, devoted to her; but a good many men were that, and without devotion he would have been intolerable. If a more cunning, perplexing thought came, Philip was its foster-father, Lady Alcester its nurse. The latter positively flung herself upon this possible line of retreat. Here was a rich man, a man of admitted influence in the salon and the House; a man who might not shrink even from the daring step of marrying her daughter. And what a triumph that would be; what a flag to wave in the faces of the chattering legions who rattled the arms of sympathetic notice upon whatever parade-ground they could discover. Yes, the stake might be the greatest a woman could play for. And the wasp-waisted one did not lose a single moment in broaching it so soon as Philip had left them.

"Of all the men I have met for twelve months," she began, in the high-key of her enthusiasm, "Arthur

Danby is positively the nicest. You must admit that, Alice—no one could deny his gifts—he can't deny them himself."

"Men rarely attempt that," said Alice, with some reserve. "When I meet a man who denies that he's clever, I shall write to the *Spectator* about it. Of course I'm glad that you like him, mother; you used to find Wargrave so dull."

"My ignorance, child. Of course I did not know, and you never said a word. That's what I call really clever. There's no doubt that something must be done, and the sooner the better. Now, is it to be Danby, Alice? Surely you can tell your own mother?"

Alice scarcely had patience to listen to it, but she said at length, with a shrug—

"Quentin used to be the nicest man you knew, mother. I suppose Percival has been writing to him for money? Isn't that it? His letter was not answered, and you are angry about it?"

The retort was entirely lost upon a lady whose delicate sense of pecuniary relations had long been blunted by misfortune.

"You know it is nothing of the kind, Alice. Percival would never write to your husband for money."

"To my husband, indeed! Then Percival has turned over a good many new leaves since he left Cambridge."

"His university career ruined, our names disgraced in the halfpenny papers, my own daughter driven from London—please go on, dear, I am listening patiently."

"I congratulate you, mother; it is more than I can do when you speak of Mr. Danby."

"Ah, you will learn patience in good time! Poverty is an excellent school. When this man's money fails

us, what then? Ask yourself that sometimes—upon your knees, my dear."

"My dear mother," rejoined Alice very calmly, "I never pray for a bank balance."

Still at variance upon a delicate subject, they separated for the night, and Alice, compelling herself by sheer will to dismiss so vain an argument, lay awake with other thoughts until the sun shone once more upon her roses, and the early mists had drifted away over the hills of Henley and the east. Then she slept, and when she came down to breakfast she found herself alone at the table. Lady Alcester remained in bed with one of those headaches which nothing but antipyrin could cure; Mr. Rose had gone up to the islands in a sculling boat; it was left for Alice to dress herself for the river at leisure, and then to get her favourite canoe and paddle idly down toward the lock. Why she went down stream, unless it were to pique Philip, she scarcely knew. Arthur Danby would be out, of course. He always was at the week-end; and Alice had scarcely paddled by Noble's when she saw him punting himself very cleverly toward her, and clearly determined not to be avoided. So she waited for him, and the two craft drifting side by side, she discovered herself regarding him with those critical eyes a woman turns instantly upon a man with whom she has been associated even remotely by the unbridled tongue of gossip.

Danby had been a good oar at Oxford, but there was something mincing about his water gait; a casual spectator certainly would have hesitated to name him for an athletic celebrity. Writing may have made of him an exact man; but it gave him at the same time an unbecoming stoop, and a habit of prying about with ill-used eyes which appeared perpetually to have lost

something. On this Saturday morning he wore an Oxford cap, the Leander scarf, and immaculate flannels, which declared the fact that he still affected aristocratic athleticism. When he saw Alice, his expressionless face shaped a childish smile, and he hazarded the opinion that canoes were dangerous.

"But I thought you were—what does Percy call it?—oh, yes, a waterman. Surely you don't really think so?"

He poised upon his punt in an effort to catch a picturesque attitude, and answered laughingly—

"We measure danger with our interests. If I were any one else—that fat stockbroker over there with the hawk's ensign, for instance—I should recommend him a canoe in the hope that he might come to an early grave. But the Lady Alice Caird——"

"My dear man, do you really think I cannot swim?"

"I am sure you can. No accomplishment is an accomplishment unless you have it. And I must say that the *ensemble* is perfect—just as perfect as the day. Now, can you imagine any one being in town to-day for choice?"

"Oh, that depends on many things—people, and places, and who orders lunch. Remember, it's Saturday—there's polo at Hurlingham after lunch at the Carlton. One might drive back to a dinner at Prince's, and then the theatre. Of course, there would be supper afterwards."

"And you honestly declare, in the whole spirit of truth, that you would sooner be there than here?"

"It would depend entirely upon the man who drove me to Hurlingham."

"Then shall we say next Saturday, if Lady Alcester will come?"

"Do you really desire my mother's company ardently?"

"I pine for it with intolerable longing."

"Then I will tell her to arrange it. So sorry I shall not be able to accept. Dicky is coming down with General Oscar."

Danby had not the art which conceals art. His look of blank discomfiture made her laugh, and he laughed with her. The instantaneous analysis made from the new standpoint of possibility did not befriend Arthur Danby. And yet a whispering voice said all the while —"He could drag you from the social morass; he could re-establish your fortunes and your house." This might never be forgotten now that it had been suggested to her. She was thinking of it when they entered the lock together and the great sluices began to run—thinking of it as of one of those immeasurably remote and entirely improbable alternatives which tragedy offered her.

"I shall take Oscar out one day, and there will be an accident," Danby said as he drove his punt ahead of her, and clutched at one of the chains rather clumsily—"you have so many friends——"

"And there's one of them waiting at the steps for me now," said Alice, indicating a chubby-cheeked, flaxen-haired boy, Willie by name, who waited for her every morning at the lock, and always had flowers in his tiny fingers. Willie was there to-day with a little bunch of common daisies in his hand, and as soon as he perceived the canoe he began to climb down the slimy stairs to the water's edge.

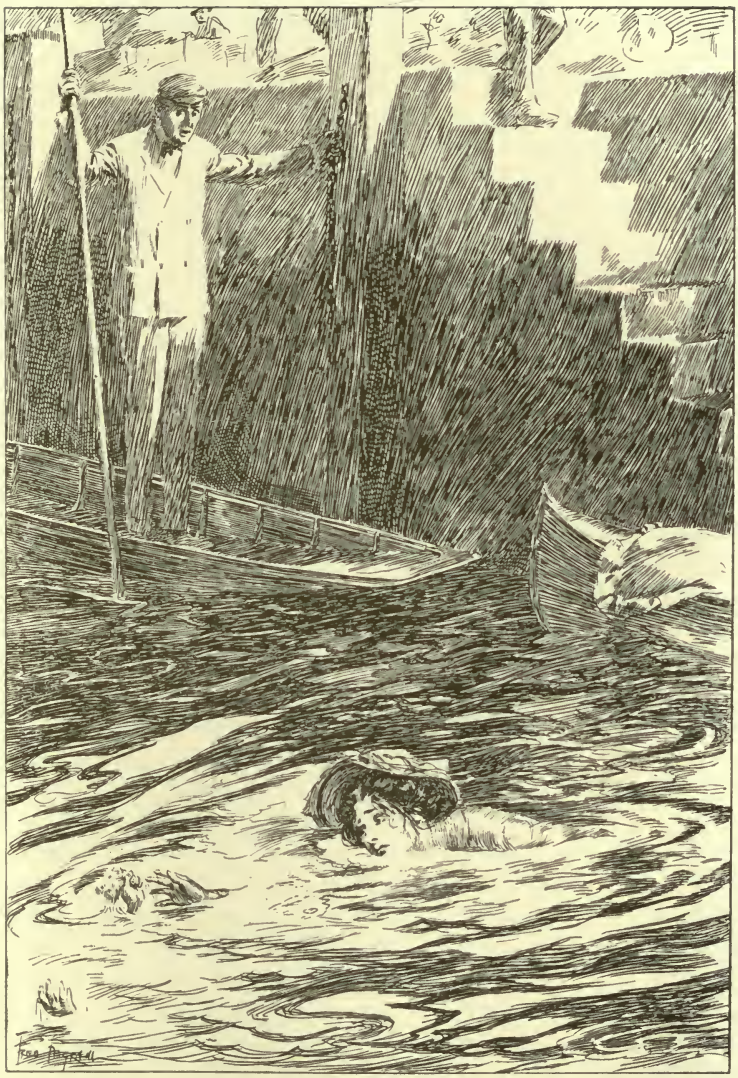
"Don't come down, Willie," she called up to him; "you can tie them on my paddle."

"I'll get them," said Danby hastily. "He'll be head over heels in the lock unless you look out. Take care, little man—mind how you come!"

The child did not understand that they spoke to him; he came on down the steps; the water below swirled and boiled as it rushed through the sluices to the lower river—there was a false step, an oath from the lock-keeper above, a cry from Alice, and then the accident. Caught by the race of the water, the boy was whirled round and round, sucked under, drawn on resistlessly to the gaping sluices. And then the woman, ashamed at the cowardice of the men about her, plunged headlong into the death stream and caught the child's hand with the flowers still clasped within it.

Alice could not have told any one why she tried to sacrifice her life at a moment when sacrifice seemed so impotent; the momentary vision of the agonised face—perhaps, had she known it, a more subtle appeal to her instincts of maternity—compelled her to act as she did; and utterly deaf to the men's warning cries, she dived from the canoe and caught the child's hand in her own. For a long instant the current drew them under, beating like a cataract upon her head and face. The intense cold of the driven water, the choking spray, the slimy walls which her hands touched, contributed to the horrors of the pit; but above these was the paralysing memory of the open sluice gate and the engulfing death beneath it—and yet this could not abate an almost fierce desire to save the child, let the consequences be what they might. Perchance the very violence of effort helped her in some measure to hide from her eyes the consequences of failure. All that passed in the water and upon the banks above was like a panorama of fleeting scenes tending to one final scene which should answer the question "life or death?"

Never before had she been able to understand wholly that the moment comes to each when the truth of death



"Alice could not have told anyone why she tried to sacrifice her life at a moment when sacrifice seemed so impotent."

is spoken, and the voice of hope may not hush it. "Yours to die, yours to go out into that unknown land which myriads of your fellow-creatures have trod, to share the secret with them, never more to look up from this green earth, or to hear the voices you have loved; yours to pass the silent gate which shall shut upon you for all eternity." A young girl's life has to do with none of these thoughts, but they came to Alice swiftly as she pressed the child to her heart and said that her strength was leaving her. And they bridged the seas for her, carried her in a dreadful instant to the side of the husband who had left her, so that she seemed to be stretching out her white hands, not to the mild blue sky above her, but to the man who had wronged her, that he would lift her up to life and light, shield her once more with his strong right arm, and take from her that burden she was not able to bear. For a truth she stood soul to soul with Quentin in the moment of her agony; knew him as she had never known him; loved as passion had never taught her to love. And with his name upon her lips, with his image clear before her eyes so that his very arms might have been encircling her, she lost consciousness and was laid for dead upon the grass of the weir.

Philip Rose had been the agent. The story that he had sailed up river proved to be a myth of destiny—for a jealousy he could not define, a longing to be sure that Alice was not meeting Arthur Danby secretly, turned the head of his sailing dinghy towards Henley, and he had witnessed both the meeting and the subsequent disaster in the lock. A fine swimmer, he plunged into the surging waters at the very moment the lock-keeper began to shut the sluices, and diving again and again, while those above watched him in an agony of suspense

which could not utter a single word, he caught the pitiful figures at last and fought his way for very life to the slimy stairs with them. And then Arthur Danby, who had stood like one transfixed during those awful moments of doubt and distress, received the burden from his arms, and staggered up with it to the bank above.

Danby knew that he had played a coward's part—he who had ambled through life so philosophically had failed in that supreme moment which comes to most of us sooner or later. Peril had paralysed his faculties; he had been tried in the fire and found wanting—and he had the manhood to admit it.

"She would have been drowned but for you," he said quietly; "yes, I know it—and am ashamed."

CHAPTER XXXII

CHINA CITY

QUENTIN CAIRD slept a troubled sleep in his room at the Palace Hotel, San Francisco, upon the morning of the day which witnessed the accident at Marsh Lock. Here in this city of the Golden Gates, this wonderful cosmopolitan city to which other cities of civilisation have contributed so much of their best, the first stage of an eccentric journey had come to its end. Hither Quentin had followed the woman who had promised to give him freedom; here, when a few hours had passed, he believed he would know the best or the worst.

It had been a rapid pursuit, often vain, often heart-breaking in its disappointments. When he left London he understood that he would find Isabella in New York, that she would at once open her heart to him, and that he would return to England and his home before the month was done. In this idea, the rest and change of the ocean passage were doubly welcome to him. He enjoyed tranquil seas and the pleasant company which is rarely absent from the deck of a great steamship. There may even have been something of pleasure in the opportunity of revisiting a country wherein good years of his youth had been spent; for he had loved the old wild, exhilarating days of Bohemian irresponsibility and

entire abandonment of the conventionalities of life. And he had always been foremost in the ranks of those who named America as henceforth the ruling nation of the world, invincible in its numbers, its wealth, and the creative genius by which nations live. When he entered New York bay, the magnificent panorama stimulated him as though the gates opened upon a road by which the living nation was reached, and the dead peoples were shut out. The city herself, with her torrent of sounds, her restless throngs, her cloak of Paris, her sword of Germany, and her eyes of the awakened West, reinspired him with those ambitions of action of which England had long since robbed him. A man could achieve in such an atmosphere; he needed no heraldic passport but that which brains emblazoned; and if the same social jealousies, the same pride of place, the same petty strife really lurked amidst this turmoil, at least they were less offensively arrogant than in the Europe he had left.

Quentin arrived in New York upon a Saturday morning, and drove straight to the Hotel Druot, one of the smaller and more private establishments near the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty-sixth Street.

The answer to his inquiry for Isabella, that she had stayed but three nights in the hotel, was the first real clue to the perplexities in which this journey was about to involve him. Not by one line or any vague message had she led the people of the hotel to believe that inquiries would be made for her from Europe. All that was known was that she had gone on to Chicago to join a theatrical company there, and that she had been accompanied by a Spaniard, Juan di Juni, who appeared to be acting as her American agent. Such astounding tidings deprived Quentin in a moment of all

those quixotic arguments which had carried him to America. What need, truly, had Isabella of him? And what were her promises worth? The doubt stimulated him to fresh effort. He left for Chicago by the first train—a cab drove him to the theatre in which Isabella had appeared. They told him there that her engagement was at an end—she had left for the West, and was then playing in San Francisco.

And so to San Francisco, whither haste carried the hunter before the quarry arrived. An inquiry at the Bush Street house afforded no other tidings than those of Isabella's engagement for the following week, and the fact that she would certainly arrive in the city before that date. The sudden realisation of leisure was like a douche of cold water to a heated brain. Quentin stood still to reckon with himself. Here in this very city he had married the woman and given her the right to his name. Here in this city he must meet her again face to face.

He had known many friends in San Francisco, and some of these remained to claim his acquaintance. Joe Dillon, for instance, the wildest scamp that ever sailed a Bohemian ship, he had become Doctor Dillon now and tickled the palates of a wealthy connection with those harmless drugs so necessary to the deception of imaginative humanity. Quentin had known this man excellently well years ago, and he met him in Montgomery Street on the day following his arrival in San Francisco. The mutual recognition was none the less hearty because it was slow.

"What—Parson Caird, isn't it? Man, my sight's getting whiskers on—but it is the parson, isn't it?"

Quentin's gravity had given him the nickname in the old days, and he smiled at it now A brief instant

showed him a vision of his house at Knowl, with generals, bishops, and statesmen about him, and he contrasted it with the magnificent street of this Western city, and the hurrying figures passing by, and the honest, plain-spoken man, with the broad felt hat and the warm hand-grasp.

"It's Parson Caird all right," he rejoined, "and you're Joe Dillon—I should have known you anywhere—clean-shaven men carry their numbers on their chins. Yes, I don't think you are much changed, Dillon."

"I'll say the same if you'll let me take you up to the club and give you some lunch. Whatever brings you to 'Frisco, man? We read that you were stuck up in England with a Duke for a brother-in-law, and a suite to yourself in Windsor Castle. And that reminds me—your old flame, Isabella, is trotting along with a fire show next week. Come, I say, that's not the game, is it?"

"Dillon," said Quentin, evading the direct reply, "I'll take that lunch of yours—we are not addressing the multitude. Let's go where there are not so many ears."

"My dear parson, we'll go right now. So you haven't forgotten the old club after all. Well, it's written a page for both of us—eh, what? And young Cartwright. I always look upon him as a baby, though he's thirty-five if he's a day. Do you remember the night we carried the great god Buddha round the Chinese quarter—eh, what? Well, I'm half living down there now—seeing this opium business to the floor. They call me the great specialist—eh, what? Doesn't old time bang us along now—no leisure for whiskers on our ideas if we want to keep up with him—just step into my caravan, and we'll drive a block or two. Truth, there's no one alive I'd sooner see in 'Frisco this day."

The merry Irishman—Irish but in birth, for he had lived thirty-five of his forty years in San Francisco—chatted on all the way to the club, and there he insisted upon a sumptuous lunch. Other old friends remembered Quentin at a glance and came thronging around him—General Parks, who had fought in Cuba; Herbert Cartwright, the artist; Ben Robins, the actor; comrades all of the Bohemian days—and the corks flew and the dishes passed, and there was no doubt whatever about this welcome. All these men remembered Quentin's love affair, and some of them, perhaps, attributed his visit to the fact of Isabella's approaching appearance in the city; but they were wise enough to hold their tongues; and it was not until late in the afternoon that Quentin found himself alone with his host and able to speak a little freely to him. By no means willing to play the part of a spy, nevertheless there were questions which he might justly ask, dictated as they were by common prudence.

"Tell me, Dillon," he began, "have you seen Isabella since I left the city—have you heard of her?"

The Irishman looked at him from beneath heavy brows, and replied a little cautiously—

"Why, yes, Caird, she was in 'Frisco two years ago—after the trouble in Paris, you know."

"Then you heard of her trouble in Paris?"

"Trust the yellow envelopes for that. She was looked upon here as a daughter of the place, and, when she died, a good many came out to tell her story; they usually do when it can't be answered—but you should ask the General. He knows more about it than I do. His friends got anxious about him last time she was over."

"Did she come alone, Dillon?"

"That was so—quite alone, and behaved like a model of propriety. I remember some chump saying that you had never been properly divorced from her—but that's like them. The papers took it up, too, though Parks would have it that you cut the noose in London. It was none of my business, anyway, and I kept out of it. That's where the Turk's ahead of us. He shuts his women up in a harem and the divorce courts don't run. It's the only way if you want peace."

He looked at Caird sharply, as though expecting a confidence; but Quentin had already made up his mind to keep his own counsel, and he turned the subject adroitly.

"You ought to know—doctors see most of it, if the common tongue is right. But tell me about yourself; you said you were specialising. What's it in, Dillon—where does your work lie?"

"It lies among the Chinamen—eh, what? Well, that's a fact; I'm trying to learn more than most of us know about this opium of theirs. Come and see my practice—I've had a pig-tail on his back for ten days—come and see him; it's nothing new to you, but I dare-say you have nothing better to do—eh, what? Then get your hat on while I speak to the pantry."

They left the club together, and, setting out for Jackson Street, entered presently that monster labyrinth which is known to all the world as China City. It was not new to Quentin; many a jest of other days had found him in these narrow streets, looking up to the scanty patches of blue sky above, and wondering at the nameless infamies the towering walls concealed. But the place, he thought, was vastly more crowded than when he last visited it. Impossible to believe that the tall, gaunt houses could accommodate the seething

multitudes which moved to and fro in these reeking alleys, or that a tithe of this almond-eyed people could exist by its labours in San Francisco. And yet he knew that the tenements above the ground were as nothing to those below the ground in the mighty cavernous warren which these Chinamen had burrowed. There in the depths the horrors were to be revealed—buried crimes and unnameable outrage fitly hidden from the spreading heaven or the breath of the life-giving air. And this man at his side, careless Joe Dillon, asked him to go down to the sights and scenes he could so readily imagine—and he laughed at himself for his momentary hesitation. Was life worth so much to him then that he should husband it in wool? Not so, assuredly.

They turned down narrow streets, passed many a temple at whose doors the joss-sticks burned, before Dr. Joe found the house of his patient. It was much like the others, garishly decorated with flags and lanterns, and teeming with screeching Chinamen to its very attics. Breathing as they might in its foul and repugnant air, they began their descent to the inferno, and as they went they obtained glimpses of noisome dens and filthy kitchens, and prone figures everywhere lying amidst garbage indescribable. How many stairs they trod, Quentin could not be at the pains to ask; it seemed to him that they must be at the very bottom of a mine when Joe Dillon of a sudden threw open a narrow door, and the man who had guided them to the depths held up his lantern that they might see to enter the frightful room.

Quentin gasped for very breath; but interest compelled him to go in; and before he had realised that this was their destination he found himself standing in

a cellar some twelve feet square, before a wooden bench, upon which a very old Chinaman lay heavy and still in his morphic sleep. A more remarkable countenance he had rarely looked upon, for it might have been the head of a fabulous image carved from sallow marble, and coloured by the crudest art of Eastern mysticism. By his side another of his race filled a pipe of the dream-giving opium with all the circumspection such a task demanded—but it was rather the suggestion of the cellar, the profundity of the silence, the depth of the pit and its mine-like atmosphere which touched Quentin's imagination and left him shuddering.

"You needn't be frightened to talk," said Joe Dillon with a laugh, as he rolled the sleeping Chinaman round, and put his hand upon his heart. "Old Chow-wow here has been asleep for a fortnight—if he hadn't, he'd have been dead. Perhaps it's much the same thing—I'm trying to find out whether your De Quincey faked it all or wrote the honest truth. Anyway, he's left opium standing still for half a century, and I'm going to see what's in the bottom of the glass. Rum old chap, isn't it—looks like a mug off a tea-pot. I guess he's swallowed enough opium to poison a city, and yet he's a hundred and two, or thereabouts. We'll have him out to-morrow, and hear what he's been dreaming about—it isn't what De Quincey dreamed, you bet."

They covered the old man up, and left him to his sleep. As they mounted the steps towards the light the merry doctor related an anecdote with a sangfroid which was inimitable.

"If ever you want to be sure that a friend is taken care of, send him into China City with one of these liver-coloured pilots. He'll run against an accident, sure as thunder! Young Charles Hoffmyer was the

last who came round here for a skirmish—he went down the Wen Ho mine, as we call it; but he never came up again. They say a door opened as he passed—a Chinaman just put a knife into him for luck. I don't know—but it was a bad business. And where do the police come in on a job like this?—why, a hundred miles behind the fare any way."

Quentin thought that the opportunity of the harangue was exceedingly well chosen. This Jacob's ladder up which they climbed showed them mysterious doors at every staircase—some of these stood open and revealed flash pictures of weird and horrible figures, squatting upon reeking boards, prone and still in bunks, or merely passive at the table, like distorted images in stone. One of these pictures Quentin remembered for a long time, for it showed him a European face amid that Asiatic revel—the face of a young man grown old in debauchery, very white, and yet retaining much refinement, and even good looks, in its sallow contour. This man sat up in a bunk and was eating as they passed. A Chinaman waited upon him very civilly, but the others in the room paid no heed to him whatever.

"Yon chap used to skipper a ship between here and Yokohama," said the doctor as they went on. "They called him the handsomest man in 'Frisco then. I suppose he picked the habit up in China ports. He was fired out a year or so ago, and he's lived here mostly ever since. That's the wonder of it—men who go the wrong road always seem able to find money enough for drink or drugs—where it comes from, God only knows, but they get it. Ask yourself if ever you knew an elbow lifter cured for the want of a dollar. I never did, and I've written bills for a few of them.

There always seems a greenback going for the man who means to kill himself."

"And obviously nothing could save a case like that?" said Quentin with some curiosity.

Joe Dillon shook his head.

"That's just what I'm studying to find out," he replied; and with that he took a full breath once more, for the terrible house lay behind them.

"I hope you'll succeed," Quentin said as they stepped into the runabout once more, and then, remembering the hospitality expected of him, he added—"I think I told you I was at the Palace Hotel? Of course I shall expect all my old friends to rally round me. You must dine with me to-morrow, and we'll talk old times again."

"Ah, those old times!" cried Dillon, with a wise shake of his massive head. "What would life be if we couldn't talk of them sometimes?"

He was not answered. As the runabout turned into Montgomery Street a cab passed them by, and in that cab sat Isabella Montanes, with a Spaniard at her side.

"The very lady we were talking about," cried Dillon with some confusion, "and she's going your way, too!"

"I shall follow her," rejoined Quentin earnestly. "Please let me get out."

The doctor said nothing. Some dim idea of the Englishman's purpose in coming to San Francisco occurred to him in that moment. "He'll want friends," he said to himself, "and here's one to begin with."

CHAPTER XXXIII

A DIAMOND BRACELET

QUENTIN returned to the Palace Hotel with quick steps. He had been preparing himself for many weeks for this final interview with Isabella, but its near approach excited him none the less. Many years had passed since he spoke the last intimate word to the woman who had written so many pages of his life's story. The kaleidoscope had turned so often, since their last meeting, the changes were so many, that this visit was like a new day of his boyhood, a picture of his past conjured up by a vivid recollection which lost no detail of it. Here in this city he had married Isabella in the days when a thousand dollars had been riches beyond avarice ; here he had lived in Bohemian turmoil, drifting upon a stream of pleasure toward an unknown goal. And from that vortex his father's death alone had dragged him. He, the forgotten wanderer, returned to wealth and station in England. The wife, who had left him within a few months of their marriage, disappeared from his ken, and he remained confessedly indifferent to her departure. Her reported death in Paris seemed no more than a natural sequel to the natural mistake they both had made. He had done her no wrong, and an accident of destiny merely returned him the charter of his freedom.

It was close upon six o'clock when Quentin entered the famous courtyard of the Palace Hotel. A searching glance cast amid the cosmopolitan throng, invariably to be found in that splendid centre of a cosmopolitan city, did not disclose the face of the woman he sought. To his inquiry of the clerk whether Madame Montanes had taken a room at the hotel, the answer was that nothing was known of her, nor was she expected.

"People of her sort don't usually stop at the Palace," the man said. "We have enough acting to do ourselves, and the old women make the music. I should advise you to send round to the theatre; they'll know where she is fixed up all right."

The advice was good, and Quentin summoned a messenger without delay and despatched him to the Bush Street Theatre. In half an hour he had his answer, but not the information he had looked for. Madame Montanes, they said, was staying at the Grand Hotel, but she was expected at the theatre in the course of the evening.

Quentin heard the lad with some impatience, and, when he had finished, he sat down and wrote a brief letter to his wife.

"I am here, at your wish," he said, "and shall be glad to see you at the earliest possible moment. The bearer will wait for an answer."

He sent the lad off with a promise of a dollar if the reply were brought in ten minutes, and then fell to pacing the room as the caged prisoner of his own curiosity. What should he say to Isabella when he found himself face to face with her? There must be no beating about the bush this time; he was determined upon that. If the freedom which she promised him were really freedom in fact and law he would accept it

gladly, and return to England as fast as train and steamer could carry him. But what if it were nothing more than tacit acquiescence in the *status quo ante*. What if she merely said, "Go your own way, do what you please, it is nothing to me!" He believed this to be the more probable thing. And yet curiosity plagued him with an impatience which was intolerable.

The final answer to these messages reached the Palace Hotel at seven o'clock—a horrid scrawl upon a card offering a rendezvous at the new Lyceum Theatre at nine o'clock. That hour had not yet struck when Quentin handed his card to the stage door-keeper of the Lyceum, and was by him immediately admitted to the garish ante-chambers beyond. Through a crowd of painted ladies, by grotesque groups of waiting actors, up the narrow, winding stair the willing attendant conducted the anxious Englishman until, halting before a crazy door in the narrowest of narrow corridors, he said—

"The lady don't play until next week, sir—she won't be called to-night if that's anything to you."

Quentin smiled at the crude intimation, and standing a moment at the door he tried in vain to maintain his natural composure. Never would he have believed that this interview must cost him so much—yet, when a jaunty voice answered him, his heart palpitated like a girl's, and the muscles of his face were twitching.

Isabella, dressed entirely in black, lay upon a velvet sofa on the right-hand side of the shabby room; the young Spaniard, Juan di Juni, sat upon the corner of a bare oak table, with a cigarette box before him. A number of electric lamps troubled the eyes with their unnecessary brilliance; the little dressing-table in the corner had none of those puffs and paints commonly associated with an actress's dressing-room. Evidently

the occupants of the room had been in close conversation when Quentin entered, but they ceased when they heard his knock, and looked at each other with amused curiosity.

Isabella was the first to speak.

"I was expecting you, yes," she said frankly. "There are so many people at the hotel, is it not? Well, we can talk here. Nobody listens to any one else in a theatre—they are all trying to make themselves heard, you know."

She held out her white hand, heavily jewelled, and directed an appeal to the young Spaniard with her eloquent eyes.

"He is going away," she said to Quentin; "we have so much to do here, is it not? You can come back in an hour, my friend"—this to Juni—"but not a little minute before."

The Spaniard went reluctantly, looking at Quentin with an insolence he was at no pains to conceal; and as he went Isabella laughed in that mocking feminine key which is so peculiarly the dominant note of the theatre.

"Please sit down," she said to Quentin as she took a cigarette from the box upon the table, and struck a match from a little gold case upon her neck-chain, "you must not mind Señor Juni. He is my agent, *bien entendu;* he makes the people pay, *mucho*, and I make them laugh a little. He is thinking that you want me for another house. *C'est bien drôle.* But tell me, have you really come to see me; was there nothing else that brought you to San Francisco, Mr. Caird? I think there must be; you would not come so far to see poor little me."

Quentin flushed when she called him Mr. Caird. He could not but remember the passionate words of love

which had passed between them in the first days of their married life; how that she had delighted in those extravagant phrases and gestures of passion which come to Southern races so naturally. Here they were, two human souls which had known a brief hour of the supreme intimacy, now feigning to be the merest acquaintances; each afraid to recall the past by an honest word of confession. Even Quentin found it difficult to say exactly what he had meant to say when he entered her room, but he would have no truck with make-believe, and he stated his purpose almost bluntly.

"Isabella," he began, "you know perfectly well why I have come to San Francisco. If you have forgotten the reason, let me remind you of it."

He pushed across the table the identical cablegram she had sent to Philip Rose—the brief message which had offered him freedom for the pursuit of it.

"That is my reason," he went on calmly. "I cannot believe that it was necessary to ask for it."

The Spaniard lay back upon the sofa a superb figure, sensuous, amused, and yet entirely callous. Quentin could not know that this promise had been made upon one of those emotional impulses which move women strangely in the moment of distress. He could not know that her vanity now tempted her and would exact from him a greater price even than this journey.

"Yes," she said slowly as she blew a cloud of smoke from pouting lips, "I did send that cable—poor, foolish little me. I wanted you to know; I never thought that you would come; why should I?"

"Then you were not acting seriously?"

"Seriously, *mon ami?* Have we ever dealt seriously with each other, you and I? We were babies when we called ourselves married; we were babies playing in the

sunshine. I amused you for a little while, and you thought you were in love with me. I am not vexed with you for that; no woman is vexed because a man is in love with her. We were not wise, *mon ami*, but who is wise at twenty-one? If I were to make the laws, I would have all our boy and girl marriages for one little year; they should then begin again, when they could tell themselves how foolish they were. You were not serious, nor was I—why should we trouble ourselves because once upon a time we made a contract? You go your way, and I'll go mine; I shall never quarrel with you again. In Paris, you know, I was mad; the prison made me dreadfully afraid. I believed that they would send me away across the sea, and then I remembered the friend who had been my friend so long ago. It will not harm him, I said; no one will believe the dancer; he will help me, and I shall be free. You know that it happened so. They let me out of prison, and I came away to America. Very well, there is your freedom, *mon vieux*—I shall never trouble you again as long as I live."

She spoke without any trace of feeling whatsoever, and as she smoked the blue rings floated about her, and her large black eyes appeared to be following some pattern upon the damp-stained ceiling as though her thoughts were written there, and to be read therefrom. To Quentin the whole story seemed a revelation of almost infantile disingenuousness. As word after word fell from her lips implying irresponsibility, indifference, even a subtle mockery of his own earnestness, he could not but recall another scene when Geoffrey Lister had said, "Your duty is to her." Did his duty indeed lie at the side of this strange being with whom he had not a single impulse in common, whose very elementals of life were so different from his own? He could not

believe it. The world, after all, is the school for men, not the seminary, he said, and saying it, at length he answered her—

"I do not judge you," he responded without anger; "the mistake that we made belongs to the past—let us leave it there by mutual consent. I cannot believe that you asked me to cross the Atlantic to tell me that which you could have written so readily. There is something else, Isabella—you have yet something to say. I shall wait patiently until you are disposed to take me into your confidence."

His manner had become firmer—she had feared him in the old days when the strife of wills left him with the victory; and she perceived that he was changed in nothing, not even in this power to compel her as he would. Perhaps, had he appealed to her *camaraderie*, she would have told him what he wished upon the spot; but the desire to have this strong man at her beck and nod, were it but for a day, ministered to her vanity and helped her to fence with him.

"What should I have to tell you?" she said. "What are you to me that we need trouble about each other at all?"

"We are man and wife in the eyes of the law, Isabella!"

She laughed with real delight.

"Man and wife, yes, yes—I am the wife of the English millionaire—that is droll—and all that he has is mine, and I could go to his house in—what you call it?—Staffshire, not as I went, the *chic* French maid who wait upon the Lady Leverton, but as Madame Caird, as your wife, *mon ami*, for all the world to laugh upon and say, 'Vulgaire.' No, no, Quentin, I do not wish it—it is nothing to me if you are rich as Jay Gould; I must be free; I am the wild bird—I never perch anywhere long. And I shall never tell them again, I promise it."

He sighed heavily, unable to gather up the tangled threads. How could he argue with such logic as this—how compel her if she would not.

"Your silence is nothing to me, Isabella," he rejoined; "I believed that you asked me to come to you to give me my freedom——"

"And I give it you, *camarade*, absolutely, here and now. If you wish it, the American law shall give it you too. We will go to Nevada together, and the judge will say 'Alright' for a hundred-dollar bill. It is nothing to me, for it will make the people laugh, Say, shall we go to-morrow?"

He smiled at an alternative so simple.

"Our marriage was perfectly regular," he said; "your divorce in Nevada would not be worth the paper it is written upon to me."

"Ah, *mon Dieu!*—what a man! And I am round his neck like a great big stone he cannot throw away."

"Let me be serious, Isabella. I will be content for to-night to say that you are not ready to tell me everything. But I shall remain in San Francisco—and you will always find me at the Palace Hotel. There is another thing—it is your claim upon me. If you forego it, I do not. In so far as my money can be of help to you, it is yours. Tell me of your needs and I will endeavour to satisfy them—it will be a satisfaction to me to do so."

Her eyes had began to sparkle when he spoke of money; she was like a spoiled child who had heard the promise of a toy.

"Give me a diamond bracelet for auld lang syne—a big one, now will you?" she asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders and rose, for the Spaniard's step could be heard in the corridor.

"You shall have it to-morrow," he said.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AN ANCIENT CABALLERO

SHE was keeping something back. Quentin never had a doubt of this from the first. Yet why she kept it back, or what her reticence foreboded, he was quite unable to imagine.

She was not the common adventuress ; his knowledge of her character, learned long ago, answered such a supposition once and for all time. Nor did he believe her to be a woman who would readily submit to the dictation of her intimates. If there were others about her anxious to profit by this accident of her marriage, that was not to say that she would be coerced by them. Her secret, surely, was her own ; a woman's secret, baffling and unfathomable; to reveal it she had summoned him from Europe. He said that his weapon must be patience.

These thoughts followed Quentin to the hotel, and were largely the reflections of the days that followed. The diamond bracelet, for which she had asked with the pretty air of a young girl begging a bauble, went to her upon the morning following his visit to the theatre. He saw her upon that day at the Grand Hotel, but so many odd creatures were about her, their interview was so often interrupted by her wayward impulses, that he at once abandoned his own objects and secretly

determined to say nothing of them until the first excitement of her reappearance at the theatre had subsided.

"Go back to Europe, Quentin," she repeated with apparent sincerity. "Forget that I exist. Return to your little English wife. I am your friend; I wish you to be happy. California is my country, you know, and I shall settle down here when the theatre has made my fortune. Perhaps I shall marry, *quien sabe?* we never know what misfortunes are in store for us. You were silly to run after me, because you ought to have known a woman better. I sent for you because I thought it would please you to hear that I was in America. That other man, your friend, he knew what it was. Go back to him, Quentin. To the wise a word; you understand me, do you not? '*Les absents ont toujours tort.*' If I were you I would not leave Madame with Philip Rose—not for a day, not for a single little day."

She said it with a smile showing her fine white teeth, and half shutting her dark eyes as though it were but a jest. When she perceived that Quentin did not answer her, and that the current of his thought had been instantly diverted, she tapped him with her fan and changed the subject adroitly.

"We are going to San José when this is over," she said. "I shall try to be quite alone there. This life is so fatiguing; we never, never rest. Come to San José when I am there and we will ride in the forest together. See now, you shall give a horse, and I will show you the finest country in the world. It will only be ten days—you can stay here that little while."

He told her he would think of it, and left her to the sallow-faced satellites of the theatre. The barbed shaft of suggestion she had thrown so skilfully could

not fail to wound him. Had he, indeed, been a fool to listen to the gloomy ascetic who prated of the eternal obligation? It seemed so here in this Western city, where all ties were loosely knit, and the Ten Commandments edited as favourably as might be to men's desires.

So it came about that a single word had diverted him from the purposes which carried him out of England, and cast his mind back to the home he had left. Truly, the questions which Isabella compelled him to ask himself were not pleasant to hear. What was the world saying of the wife he had left? How was it treating her? Why were her letters so vague and rare? He tortured himself with a hundred fears; imagining Alice to be doing this and that; saw her surrounded by men who must acknowledge her beauty, and might not be unwilling to take advantage of her situation. And yet he knew that he dare not return to her empty-handed; dare not go back to her and say, "I have not my freedom."

* * * * *

Isabella appeared at the theatre upon the following Monday evening; and Quentin was among the audience. Already the newspapers had told in fivefold headlines the bald story of her amazing career. This child of California, who had been La Belle Esmeralda for the French stage, here she was among her own people again, and sure of a welcome from them. No details of her life were ignored; they told you of her marriage to Quentin Caird, now the English millionaire; they seemed to hint that she had been divorced from him in some Western city; but they discovered the fact that he was then staying at the Palace Hotel, and did not hesitate to make the most of it. When she appeared at the theatre in her famous "Fire Dance" her reception

astonished even her friends. From the back of his box, where the curtains hid him from observation, Quentin watched that fantastic performance with an irony he could not wholly master. This beautiful woman (for all admitted she was that), this black-haired, white-skinned Spaniard, frenzied almost in her vivacity, the creature of the senses and the arts, enveloped there in draperies of a thousand hues, poised amidst that which appeared to be, so clever was the illusion, a very pillar of purple flame, changed swiftly to the brightest green, the deepest crimson, the purest sheen of gold—this woman stood to him for the supreme folly of his youth, for the debt which neither money nor sacrifice could repay. Idle to tell himself that she had need of him, or that any quixotic fidelity was owing to her. As she was now, so she would always be, a nomad drifting from excitement to excitement, the seeker of garish lights and the people's applause, one whose road was separated from his by a gulf of race which nothing could bridge. Truly he said that she had no claim upon him.

Attracted there at first by the purest curiosity, Quentin continued to visit the theatre during the days of Isabella's engagement. His sure conviction that she would yet give him that which he had come so far to obtain forbade him to leave the city or even to contemplate an immediate return to England.

Persistently, whenever opportunity offered, he would listen to her babble and try to interest himself in her life. The resentment of the hawks about her was nothing to him. He could smile at the militant jealousy of the young Spaniard, Juan di Juni. When his friend Dillon advised him to be cautious, he laughed frankly at the humour of it.

"My dear Doctor," he said, "you don't seriously mean that I ought to leave San Francisco to oblige a fourth-rate actor."

They were lunching at a restaurant when these remarks passed, and Dillon lit a very long cigar before he replied. It had been apparent to Quentin for some days that the doctor sought his confidence. He was not unprepared to give it, for he sadly needed a counsellor. And he listened now with unusual interest when the Irishman answered him with his own candour.

"It's not the fourth-rate actor but other names that I have heard of," he said quite frankly. "When the proper time comes, I'll speak more freely. Meanwhile, let me tell you that 'Frisco is an ugly place when there is a man waiting for you round the corner. Take my advice, boy, and go up country awhile. I don't suppose the lady will run away if it's she who's keeping you here."

It was as much as to say, "The whole town knows of it"—a direct invitation that a man should speak plainly to his friend. Quentin lit a cigar in his turn, and pushing the liqueur glass from him, he began to tell the story.

"Doctor," he said, "the *Bulletin* writes that I was divorced from my wife in Nevada. Well, it isn't true."

Dr. Joe looked up sharply.

"I suppose not," he said. "An English court, perhaps?"

"In no court, Dillon. I never was divorced from her."

"Good God! But we read of your marriage to the Englishwoman."

"Exactly! I was married at St. Paul's Church in London after they sent me the certificates of this woman's death from Paris."

He told him the rest of the story; of the accident

at the circus, of Isabella's reported death, of her going to Knowl, of his separation from his wife, and his subsequent journey to America.

"She offered me my freedom, and I ask, what did she mean? If I put the police on I might tell you something more about her, but a sense of loyalty forbids me to do that. I say that this woman had some good reason to bring me here. What is it, then? You have a shrewd head, Doctor, try this little sum for yourself. I have worked it out until my head is a blank. She keeps me here and has nothing to say. She does not ask me for money; she promises not to return to Europe. What does it mean, Dillon, what in God's name lies behind it?"

The doctor had listened to the long story with the patient ear of a man accustomed to receive the confidences of his friends. When Quentin had finished he smoked for a little while in silence, and then, turning in his chair, he said in a low voice—

"It means, my son, that you are a decoy-duck."

"I don't follow you, Dillon."

"Why, man, a blind horse would see it. She's head over ears in love with some one or other."

"Well, what then?"

"She wants to show him that money is walking after her in thin shoes. You're the stalking horse. Directly she's netted the victim, she'll tell you to go to Japan."

"She cannot marry him, Dillon."

"Cannot! Faith, you are very young, Master Caird. Don't you know that you are living in a free country, where divorce costs a dollar and a half, and a woman changes her husband as often as she changes her hat? Of course she'll marry him if she has a mind to. That's why I tell you flatly, get out of 'Frisco; don't make a widow

of her. It's easily done, my son, when other men can pay for it."

"Come, my dear Joe, you don't suppose I am afraid of them?"

"I'm supposing nothing; you told me yourself that they have been skulking around. Now, didn't you say that they were watching you?"

"I told you I had the idea that I was being followed about the city. Most probably it's all imagination; we get these things into our heads and they stick there. It doesn't trouble me, however. Don't forget that I spent three years down in Kansas. A man learns to look out of his elbows there. This sock and buskin crowd is altogether contemptible. I wouldn't cross the street to give the wall to a dozen of them. Isabella has some queer friends, I grant you—but she herself is as simple as a spoiled child."

"And just as entirely artful, my son. Never trust a woman who closes her eyes when she speaks to you—it's infallible. I'm not saying anything against her, mind—but I know what I should do if I were you, and this city wouldn't see my back for dust before twelve o'clock to-morrow. Put that in your pipe and smoke it. As for the rest, one or two of us here may write a line or two in your story before you close the book. I promise nothing because I don't know. But time will show and the story books. Go down to Los Angeles, sir, and take the air. It's healthier than this place, and not so crowded. I can give you no better advice than that, and I'm your friend."

Quentin perceived that it was well-meant advice; but he had not the slightest intention of taking it. There are occasions common to all men when the personal unit goes for nothing, and we pursue some end regardless of consequences. So with him now, the quiet days

were but the cloak of that continuing excitement which intoxicated him sometimes as with a gambler's hope. Any day might give him all; there was no working hour when the veil might not be torn aside and the truth laid bare; and, while the thousandth chance remained, he would not have quitted the city for a fortune.

So he remained in San Francisco, following Isabella to the theatre, to the restaurants, to her hotel; dogging her with almost childish persistency. That others followed him in their turn he came to know more surely on the third day after his friend, the doctor, had cautioned him. When he dressed himself in his bedroom at the Palace Hotel that morning he was convinced that some one had entered the room during the night. None of his valuables had been touched, but his papers had been searched, and even his trunks ransacked. A complaint at the office compelled him to admit that he was not sure whether or no he had shot the bolt of his bedroom door; and the clerk's somewhat sarcastic incredulity forbade him to persist. He was very far from being a man of nerves, and the visit in no way disturbed him, though he could admit the unpleasantness of espionage and surmise the reasons which had dictated it. Those who guarded Isabella so carefully were by no means ready to forego the profits of their enterprise; they plainly resented the intrusion of one who had so strange a claim upon their wage-earner and her attentions. But that they were in any way dangerous Quentin refused to believe, and he continued until the last day of Isabella's appearance at the theatre to visit her as occasion offered, and to show her beyond the risk of misunderstanding that he waited there for the fulfilment of her promise.

The "Fire Dance" delighted a bored city for some

three weeks. It was upon the afternoon following its withdrawal that Quentin received one of those surprises in which the recent months had been so fertile. This was nothing more or less than a letter from Isabella herself, in which she informed him that she had left the city for the village of Santa Clara, and that if he would visit her there some escape from their difficulties might be found. She said that there was an afternoon train upon the Southern Pacific, and that a carriage would wait for him at the San José depôt. Had he suspected the *bona fides* of this invitation, or stood in any doubt as to its authorship, the fine flourishing phrases, the Spanish exclamations, and the scraps of Parisian argot would have reassured him. None but Isabella could have written such a note. He answered it by taking the next train to San José, and he was in that city at seven o'clock. The carriage! Yes, it was there sure enough; a crazy old chariot which seemed to date from the seventeenth century, driven by an old Spaniard who might conceivably have been nursed by General Washington. The veteran, cracking a long whip ferociously, espied the Englishman at once, and claimed him.

"You for Santa Clara, sar—well, right here, if you please. Me take your valise, yes, sar. The señora expect you, sar; you jump in. Rancho de las Rocas—him not very far, sar—glory be to God."

Quentin said that he was the perfect type of the Spanish coachman who had driven bespangled dons in the days before the Gringo came. The whole equipage, the novel city, the striking scenery through which he had passed to this new land of verdant valleys and green mountains and endless sunshine began to interest him as California never fails to interest the Westerner. How far it all was from England and his home! It seemed

the very Ultima Thule of the fables ; and yet its beauty enchanted, its silence offered rest, the mildness of its air delighted the traveller. And the old Spaniard and his horses, caparisoned as though for a bull-fight at Madrid, from what ancient ark had they emerged? Quentin leaned back as a tired man in the crazy old carriage, and began to revert to the old question—was it to tell him her secret that Isabella had summoned him to Santa Clara! Surely the night would answer that question once and for all.

The carriage skirted the town of San José, and, striking eastward away from the head of San Francisco Bay, it began to climb the slope of an exquisite valley toward purple hills on the far horizon. A more picturesque vista of country Quentin had rarely looked upon. Villages, *châlets*, bungalows, even old adobe houses, the square spires of Spanish churches, the green patches of meadow land, spreading forests upon the heights, lonely woods of straight-stemmed pines, each contributed something new to that eldorado of the West. As they climbed the hill, laboriously and with tinkling bells, the landscape took the fashion of Lower Tyrol, again that of the valleys of Switzerland, yet with something of a tropical luxuriance added to them. But for the people Quentin might have found it easy to believe that he had quitted Innsbruck this morning, and not San Francisco. But nowhere has one race so quickly displaced another as in that magnificent heart of the West, where the very last traces of don and dueña are being obliterated by the swift footsteps of the East ; and the figures of activity have everywhere thrown down the picturesque idols of the great god Mañana. Of those whom the carriage passed by the most part were plain American farmers whom it had been impossible to accuse of any

striving after the picturesque. They rode good horses or drove elegant runabouts; even a motor-car came steaming up the hill road and went by in a cloud of lingering vapour; and it was not until they had left San José a good two miles behind them that a glimpse of the real coquettish *reboso* and the face of a little Spanish girl beneath it reminded Quentin of the California he had known ten years ago, and of the ardent youth whose fires then burned there. How changed it was, and yet with a living change, not to be perceived in the mighty solitudes, nor read upon the sleeping hills.

Quentin's reminiscences might have carried him far, further than he willed, indeed, but for a fresh outburst upon the part of the ancient caballero, who, cracking his whip with a new ferocity, suddenly cried "*Yi, yi!*" to the horses, and condescended to inform his passenger that their journey was nearly done.

"Yonder is the rancho, sar," he shouted, with an immense display of shining teeth; "the señor up yar, one, two, three, five minute, and I make a hurry, sar—*vi, yi!*"

His guttural frenzy certainly excited the horses he drove. They took the long slope up to the rancho on the hill at a speed which revealed unsuspected vitality; while Quentin naturally turned his eyes toward the house which was indicated and examined it with interested curiosity. Built in a cleft of the hills with the straight-stemmed pines above, and a thick wood of greater trees below, the Rancho de las Rocas was just such a picturesque bungalow as "week-ending" San Francisco loved to build. Constructed entirely of wood, with jaunty gables and odd abutments, and quite a forest of little windows; its gardens were the woods about, unfenced and open to all the world. In truth it was

just such an elegant *pied à terre* as the rich men of San Francisco build for a whim and desert upon no better pretext. Lonely, remote, unfinished, it stood in the clearing as the pioneer's hut stood centuries before it; and all around were the bending pines and the soft, crisp grasses to whose rich greens the fallen cones had lent their charm of light and shade. Quentin remembered, not without some confusion, that in just such a house he had spent his honeymoon with Isabella Montanes. And here he would find her again after the years.

There was many a "*Yi, yi!*" from the ancient caballero when they drove up to the door of the rancho; much barking of dogs and the clanging of a pleasant bell. After the briefest spell of waiting an ancient dueña, with a face that had come straight from the canvas of Velasquez, appeared at the hall door, smirking and bowing and gabbling her bastard Spanish in a profuse welcome to the stranger. To Quentin's instant question—"Where is Madame?" her answer was both evasive and amazing.

"To-morrow, señor," she said, "to-morrow very early. God of my life, how busy she has been, and the house not ready, señor, and so much to do. She will come by the morning train—yes, yes, we have done our best for you, señor. Please to make the house your own."

Upon which she fell to calling, "Inez, Chonita," many times; and when two busy maids appeared, she rated them volubly, and bade them carry in "milord's" trunks. The ancient caballero, meanwhile, stood by Quentin's side in the hall, evidently expecting some recognition. But Quentin had forgotten his very existence, for the truth of the situation was instantly understood, and it was this—that he had been summoned to the house by a trick, and that he was alone there.

CHAPTER XXXV

FOOTSTEPS IN THE WOOD

THEY had prepared dinner against his coming, and although the nights were warm in the valleys, he welcomed the sweet-smelling fire of logs burning upon the hearth of his bedroom. The house appeared to have been for some time uninhabited; he imagined that this old harridan and her equally ancient husband were its common caretakers, and that they had summoned the maids from the town to their assistance. The simple furniture, principally of American oak, though here and there of the finest red-wood, spoke of the rancho as a summer residence, and he remembered that Isabella had mentioned it with some affection more than once since he had found her in San Francisco. In San José she was born; what more natural, then, that the years should find her in the neighbourhood of her home and her birthplace? And yet, withal, the adventure remained a mystery. Why had she summoned him hither while she herself had remained in the city? Was she dealing honestly with him? Did any treachery lie behind the invitation? These questions he could not answer; nor would the old dueña answer them for him, so like a wise man he ate the excellent dinner they had prepared for him drank a bottle of real Spanish wine, and, light-

ing a cigar, he strolled out into the woods to have it out with himself.

Had not many months of capricious situation schooled Quentin to variety, the new turn of fortune's wheel might well have made him pause. The bustle which had carried him from San Francisco had also left him little leisure to speculate upon the precise position in which he would find himself at San José. Accustomed to regard the hotel as the traveller's refuge in all delicate emergencies, he had said that he would visit Isabella at her house, and then adjourn to the nearest hostelry. Certainly it had not been within his reckoning that he must visit a mountain *châlet* far from the possibility of hotels and as picturesquely isolated. Hither Isabella would come to-morrow, and she would wish him, he did not doubt, to take up his residence for some days at least at the rancho. Should he consent, he were indeed between the Charybdis of his love for Alice and the Scylla of that duty to which Geoffrey Lister had invited him so earnestly. A scrupulous mind, introspecting obligation by the accepted creeds, might have believed that here was the God-sent opportunity for which the timorous soul had prayed. "Until death do us part" —such should be the marriage vow whether it were spoken in America or in London. And this oath had sent him to the uttermost ends of the earth that he might come to this woman and say, "I am here to do that which is right—your need shall be my need, your life shall be my care." No subtle argument could turn aside the stern logic of his position if once Geoffrey Lister's contention were admitted. Nor could Quentin forget that just as the priest would have him stand toward Isabella Montanes, so in honour and his own inclination he stood toward Alice, his wife. Had the

Spaniard a claim upon him—then how much greater was Alice's claim! Did Isabella need him—then sore was the need of the gentle girl he had left to the world's buffet, and the scorn of women in England so far away! Never, in truth, did man suffer so much from the accidents of destiny or view a darker horizon before him.

There is no climate more wonderful than the climate of California; no land more generous to men. Its six months of perfect summer are often unaccompanied by a single shower of rain; and yet the rolling sea mists give moisture to the air and temper the natural dryness. Such a mist coming up from the Pacific floated in fantastic wreaths upon the hill-tops when Quentin went out from the rancho to smoke his cigar and to reckon with himself in the solitudes. The silence of this immense garden pleased him strangely—and its remoteness satisfied a longing to be out of the strife, alone with himself, and free to make his decision. He named many good reasons for Isabella's absence, but not the correct reason. She was coerced in the city, perhaps, unwilling to speak at once; perhaps she feared the young Spaniard's jealousy. Pausing in his walk, Quentin asked suddenly if it were Isabella who had summoned him to San José, or the Spaniard in her name. A less courageous man would have been disquieted by such a supposition, but Quentin dismissed it at once. He liked the very mystery of these open glades, the suggested abysses below them, the wide vista of palm and pine, the purple hills, the glittering sky above. So still was it that you could hear a twig snap, while a louder sound, regular, crunching, clumsy, was that of a man's footsteps across the sward. Quentin heard such sounds distinctly, and paused to listen. But they stopped when he stopped,

and he knew that some one had followed him from the rancho.

Was it Isabella who had lured him to that house? He began to consider this very seriously now. A man may have nerve enough, and yet lose it in the face of a subtle suggestion of hidden danger. The silent wood, the clear heaven, the black valley, the lights of the house twinkling like stars between the trees impressed him with a sense of isolation he had never known before. What, he asked, if he were the victim of a vulgar trick? There were rogues enough in Isabella's *entourage*, Heaven knew, and their resentment against a man who would take her from the theatre had reason enough behind it—but why, his sober common-sense suggested, why should it be here at San José, when it had been so readily done at San Francisco? Or did they merely want to get him out of the way for the time being that they might more surely ensnare the gifted woman who was so profitable to them? The latter seemed the more probable hypothesis —and yet the footsteps. What was he to make of them? What did they portend?

He was entirely unarmed. The "gun" which Joe Dillon had insisted upon his buying in San Francisco lay among the contents of his travelling bag; he did not even carry a good stick, and it was plain to him that if the man who watched him meant mischief, he need not go far in search of opportunity. Not a human thing moved in the silent wood about him; far away by San José he heard a locomotive's bell clanging loudly, and upon it the screech of a syren; but these sounds were far off, and they emphasised the weird intervals in which the shuffling steps were again to be recognised, falling lightly upon the mossy turf like a velvet foot upon an Eastern carpet. In vain he peered among the

forest of tree trunks, turned this way and that, stopped and went on a little way again—the mysterious steps attuned themselves to his movements, were hither, thither, deceptive as the cry of a corn-crake, betraying the presence of some unseen figure, yet forbidding him to say whether that figure walked behind or before him. And in the end the mystery, rather than the danger of mystery, began to play upon nerves long tried by emotion and distress. Quentin would have cared nothing had he seen the figure and found himself face to face with it. But from a suggestion of the unseen, it may have been from a remote whisper of the supernatural, such a whisper as even the strongest men hear upon occasion—from that he turned and retraced his steps toward the house, frankly afraid of the truth.

He knew not during his flight whether the figure followed him or no. Once, when he paused, he sought to hear the sound of heavy breathing, but the darkness was now too intense for him to distinguish aught but the black shapes of the pine stems, and so he hurried on again, not without the dread that any step might bring the covert attack upon him. As the lights of the house became clearer to his view, he remembered that he who cannot see may be himself unseen, and it came to him that the danger, whatsoever it were, would disclose itself as he entered the house and became for an instant a silhouette in the aureole the lamps cast off. This quickened his step and helped a cooler brain to artifice; for, pausing a little while as he drew nearer to the rancho, at last he ran across the clearing and entered the door almost at a bound. In the same instant a revolver was fired twice from the wood, and one of the bullets shattered the window of the hall.

Quentin went straight to his bedroom, which opened

upon the verandah of the southern wing, and, being careful to light no lamp, he felt in his bag for the revolver which the doctor had pressed upon him. The whole house below was now in an uproar. He could hear the ancient crone gabbling in guttural Spanish, and appealing to the "God of her soul" in a voice which might have been heard in the valley. Rapid exchanges of shrill cries between the serving maids were like the discharge of pistol-shots; and to these was added anon the fierce barking of dogs and the voice of the ancient caballero commanding others to follow him to the gate. Soon the baying of hounds made itself heard in the woods, and just at the moment when Quentin stepped out upon the verandah of his room, a prolonged cry, so dreadful that a human throat scarce could have uttered it, rose above the turmoil and died away in lingering echoes among the hills. Then silence fell—the hounds had not returned; men and maids whispered in awed tones; the alarm bell ceased to clang in the turret of the rancho.

Quentin stepped among this quaking crowd, and told them in a few words the story of the attack. Eloquent all together, they had as many different views of it as there were tongues to recite them. The ancient crone set it down to a stable-boy, twice dismissed for thieving; the maids declared that two sailors had begged food and drink earlier in the day, and pretended to be upon the road to San Francisco; the ancient caballero named a horse thief, and was all for riding in to San José for the police. To this, however, Quentin would not so much as listen. He associated the unknown with the recent days he had lived through; it seemed to him intolerable that the veil should be further lifted for a curious police, and he implored the old Spaniard to make light of it.

"One of your sailors out for a drunken frolic most likely," he said to the maids, and then he bade the old man fetch in his hounds. This was not so readily accomplished. The señora's dogs had come from Denmark; they were kept at the rancho at some expense—surely they should earn their bread.

"*Ojala!*" the ancient one exclaimed, falling upon any provocation to his natural Spanish, "bite first, and shut his mouth after, señor. They show the sailor man the way to 'Frisco, sar; hear 'em now. God of my soul, they take their supper out yar, señor. He no shoot tomorrow morning; he sit on the cold stone, sar, and say his prayers."

Truly the sounds from the woods were dismal enough, but they were scarcely diagnosed correctly, When the great Danes returned, one had a deep bullet-wound in his back, while the fangs of the other were bloody—plainly saying that they had found what Quentin sought in vain. A search with lanterns in the hither thicket showed a trail of blood upon the sward, grown faint and disappearing upon the slope of the hill which rose up from the high road. The would-be marauder, whoever he was, had plainly made good his escape and got away upon the high road to the north or the south. When all were assured of this, they returned to the rancho, and shuttered and barred it wherever shutters or bars could be found.

"He some tam dirty 'Frisco Chinaman," the ancient one remarked consolingly. "The señora cry for her dog, sar, but crying don't bring him to life. You go to bed and sleep. I keep a look-out with this old eye which see mucho, señor, when other men blind. You no fear he come back—he go to sew up the holes, sar, before his ship sink quite altogether."

Quentin laughed at his assurances, but he was glad, nevertheless, to find shutters to the windows of his bedroom, which gave upon the verandah, and he closed them a little excitedly when he returned there. The maids had set a bottle of whiskey and a box of excellent cigars upon a little table in his room, and when it became clear that he might light his lamp with comparative impunity he took off his coat, and, laying his revolver close to his hand, he began to smoke and to review the strange events of a singular day. How greatly the possibilities of this journey had absorbed him he did not understand until a sudden trick of memory sent his hand to the pocket of his discarded coat, and he drew therefrom two letters which had reached him almost at the moment of his departure. Of these, one was from Alice, the other from Philip Rose; and he reflected, as he tore the envelopes, with what affectionate interest he would have opened them upon any other occasion. Just as Alice had written to him in the days of their engagement, so she wrote to him now, without a word of reproach, one question concerning his momentous mission, or the tidings for which she waited with such pathetic expectation:—

"'The Warren,' Wargrave,

"*Sunday, May* 10th.

"My dearest Boy,—I write to you from 'The Warren,' at Wargrave, which Philip insisted upon my taking according to your wish. You will remember the old place, as we visited it in the Sevingcourts' time—just a comfortable old house with as many patches and soft places as a family armchair. Edna Elsen is here with me, and mother comes for the week-end, usually upon a day when that tiresome Oscar finds that he has

business in Henley. I have given one or two parties and my friends are very kind to me—of course they (the parties) don't go into the *Morning Post* now; but I am beginning to think that life is possible even without the social paragraph, and you know how devoted I have always been to the river. Your friend Mr. Danby has been here for his eyesight—it is very bad; he could not see a little child in the water yesterday, and Philip had to go in and get it out—but then a politician should turn his eyes, even if they are weak, towards heaven, and only hear of the other place from the Opposition. Philip has taken the greatest possible dislike to Arthur Danby, and I am afraid sometimes that they will settle their differences with boathooks. So I have really welcomed the wretched weather; and you must picture me warming my little toes before a really splendid fire and wondering why people always live happily ever after in novels. . . ."

She filled two pages with this silly and frivolous gossip of her house and its people. There was much of the old mood in the light and witty phrases with which she fenced about the more serious story and kept it from him. What news of Knowl she had to tell him concerned the bad weather, and its effect upon the birds.

"Jaykins says that it will be a very poor partridge season. The birds are quite washed out by the terrible rains, and the coveys are wretchedly small. He has had no instructions from you about the pheasants, but Philip insisted that he should lay down a thousand eggs, as he knew you would be disappointed if you returned before October. I will not say, my dearest Quentin, how deeply I hope for an earlier home-coming than that."

The letter concluded with some pretty expressions of her affection. But in this sentence, in which she spoke of his return, was the only one which seemed to ask him for better tidings than any he had sent. The silent reproach of it cut him to the quick; he knew that it was a letter which would grow upon his pity as the days went by, be read and re-read in that vain pursuit of an expression which the formality of words concealed. Here, in California, many thousands of miles from his home, Quentin understood once and for ever that Geoffrey Lister's gospel was false, and that his duty did not lie in San Francisco, but in England. Well enough in the goodly atmosphere of monastic righteousness to rule these straight lines of conduct and to say, There is the chart as conscience has drawn it; by that course is the haven of righteousness to be gained. He knew that it was false; as in a vision he beheld the set face of the woman he loved, he seemed to hear her voice calling him; he knew that to her alone must he answer the supreme question that life could put to him.

If this letter from Alice agitated him, how much more must he be troubled by the very frank epistle which Philip Rose had written. Here, as from a black and threatening storm-cloud gathering swiftly beneath a far sky, the lightning truth of a new danger burst upon him, for Philip told the story of Danby and the lock without reserve; he spoke of Alice's sterling bravery which had saved the child's life, and of the sharp illness which attended her courage.

"Danby," he wrote, "has been dawdling about Wargrave for some days. You know the man well enough—he's a clever *dilettante* with a pleasant tongue. If he had not been born the nephew of a duke, he might be filling an honest position as the fashion editor

of a lady's newspaper. But he has a political steam-roller behind him and a far horizon of ducal possibilities. Certainly he cut a very poor figure the other day, and I consider the accident a piece of great good fortune. Such men as he rarely put their horses twice at the fence where vanity has had a fall; and this leads me to speak of another matter, and to speak of it with a frankness which is as much to your interest as it is my plain duty. You have asked me to tell you exactly what people are saying of you and Alice, and of the position in which these extraordinary circumstances have placed her. Well, my dear Quentin, the conspiracy is at present one of silence. What may be said behind fans is no concern of ours, but the plain truth is that we are living in a kind of interregnum, during which people obviously hedge and wait developments. Clearly the feeling is that the whole truth has not been told. Some think you have been the victim of a gang of blackmailers and that suppression has naturally followed their exposure. Others declare that there is no doubt of your marriage, but that you have gone to America to get a divorce; these are the people who declare that your wife's social salvation will only be found in a second marriage. I cannot say that their view is unreasonable, and my own advice to you has been consistent. I would have faced this matter out here in England, the others could have done what they pleased; that is yet the possible course. It must be plain to you that no man has the right to leave a woman in such an equivocal position as your wife's is now. If this folly of yours, this true sham, which a mad fanatic has imposed upon you, if this is to keep you indefinitely in America, then I say that you have no right whatever to ask any further sacrifice from Alice.

There are many men who will be attracted toward her by these very circumstances which now speak of ruin. Do you intend to stand between her and an honourable future? I cannot believe it. My hope is that you will return to England without delay and leave the others to prove to the world the validity of this marriage they claim."

Quentin did not stir in his chair for many minutes after he had read this exceedingly honest admonition. Out of the storm-cloud there had come a flash which instantly revealed to him that which men are so apt to hide from themselves, be it in the pursuit of their ambitions or their passions. Much as he had suffered by reason of his wife's suffering; deep as had been his sense of obligation toward her; earnest his desire for her happiness; never had it come to him that she also must submit to the voice of duty which exhorted her to set herself right in the eyes of the world. By marriage alone could that end be achieved. "Let her marry a rich man," he said, "and the world would forgive her quickly enough." The very misfortune of it must appeal to the passions of such men as Danby, and attract them toward her. He did not doubt that she could marry well if that were her resolution.

And what forbade it? Love for a husband who had left her to bear the brunt of a social storm; regard for a man who said, "I go to the ends of the world to do my duty to another"? Not that, surely; not an equally quixotic vow of fidelity; no hope of his fortune or his name; then in God's name, what?

He put the letter from him and tried to sleep. The first wan light of dawn found him still awake and waiting for the day, as a man whose hope lies in the east and is reborn with the sun.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TWO INTERROGATIONS

THEY let him sleep far into the day, for he felt drowsy at dawn, and did not wake to the old crone's summons. When he opened his eyes the sun spread blades of light through the shuttered windows, and the woods about were alive with the silvery notes of the birds. From the verandah Quentin, still undressed, looked down upon a glorious panorama of valley and forest—here broken by the red roofs of that which might have been a mediæval town, there rising through a gamut of hues from the golden greens of the meadows to the purpler distances of remoter hills. But the superb freshness and sweetness of the air delighted him chiefly, and he lingered in the open and drank in long draughts of that life-giving breath. How exquisitely still it was! How far it seemed from the world of men's ambitions and difficulties. Viewed in this splendid sunlight, last night's mystery appeared to be but a pitiful thing enough. A drunken tramp had fired off a gun, as his American friends would put it—Quentin laughed now to think how they had barred and bolted the home against this ghostly marauder. The vigorous air stimulated his appetite; he rang for the crone and asked for a cold bath.

They served him a delicious breakfast of coffee, fish, and fruit, on a little table before the window of the dining-room. To his question, if there were any letters from San Francisco, the ancient dueña replied by delivering him a bundle of English newspapers re-directed to him from the hotel. There was no letter from Isabella, however, and he had already determined to return to the city by the morning train, when the appearance of the ancient caballero in the stableyard decisively answered his unspoken interrogation. The old man was going to the station to meet his mistress. Like a ship in harbour dressed for a royal salute, this last of the Spaniards shone with spangles from the crown of his head to the very tip of his very splendid shoes.

"Señora come to-day, sar!" he cried as he drove out. "We go down to the depôt, yes, sar—not mucho long time now; there and back before you smoke cigar, sar."

So he flourished his whip, and with the piercing "*Yi, yi!*" peculiar to his kind, went down the valley road at a gallop. When he had gone Quentin carried his budget of papers to a seat beneath a great redwood-tree, and there lighting a cigar he had news of London for the first time for some days. Much of it was commonplace—newspapers lose little by neglect—but when he had read the political twaddle, the literary columns, and the latest gossip from the theatre, a headline on a fourth page attracted his eye, and he recognised a name familiar to him. It was none other than that of Percival Lord Alcester, which an impertinent press dared to bandy with intolerable freedom. Quentin perceived at once that the catastrophe with which the wasp-like Lady Alcester had threatened her son for so many years had now come to pass.

Percival was in the Bankruptcy Court; his first appearance upon any financial stage had duly been made in Carey Street. The newspapers called it an amusing case. The laughter in court had clearly been frequent. There were certain stories of theatrical ladies, diamond bracelets, motor-cars, and suppers at the best hotels, which did not appear to be in any way related to the traditional glories of a house whose ancestors, as Percival aforesaid once put it, "went to the Grand Prix with William the Conqueror." A close examination of Percival's accounts scarcely revealed an instinct for book-keeping—

	£	s.	d.
To rent of chambers	220	0	0
„ Dog licence	0	7	6
„ Postage stamps and sundries	3,040	19	0
	£3,271	3	6

The paper reported the Official Receiver's opinion of this document that it was both inaccurate and impertinent, whereupon the bankrupt's retort was that he had been upon the classical side of his school, and confessed a bland ignorance of arithmetic. To a question why he hired a motor brougham at fourteen guineas a week when it was clearly impossible for him to pay for it, the answer came instantly, "Well, how was I to get to Ranelagh and back on Saturdays if I hadn't got a brougham?" "Do you think that honest?" the examiner asked. Percival answered, "Well, he got his car back." The subsequent interrogations were altogether characteristic of a modern scheme of life and its consequences.

"Your bill for flowers is eighty-two pounds in a little over six months. Do you consider that reasonable?"

"I don't dispute it—I suppose it's all right."

"Yes, but do you think it's fair to these people?"

"Well, they want to sell flowers, don't they?"

"And payment, I suppose, does not enter into their calculations?"

"Well, it never entered into mine."

"There is an item here for a diamond bracelet at one hundred and five guineas. Can you tell me what became of that?"

"It was a birthday present—she asked me for it, and I couldn't say 'No.'"

"And she's wearing it now, I suppose?"

"Well, I wouldn't swear to that. You'd better ask Attenborough."

"These diamond sleeve-links at eighty-five pounds—have you any observation to make upon them?"

"Yes, they were rotters!"

"I fail to follow you—they were what?"

"Rotters—I could never get them into my cuffs, so I gave them to Jephson."

"And who is Jephson?"

"Why, don't know Jephson! Why, he was in the Gordon-Bennett; everybody knows Jephson. He'd sell you a thousand-pound car if you took him out to lunch. I bought one, but they wouldn't take my bill for the deposit, so I sent it back again."

"Um—then Jephson is not in favour now! Have you any proposition to make to your creditors?"

"Oh, yes; I propose patience! Something is sure to turn up if they wait long enough."

Quentin read that the examination was adjourned *sine die* without the formality of the usual committee of inspection, and that the Earl of Alcester had been duly declared a bankrupt. His first impulse to laugh with the court quickly gave place to another when he recol-

lected the new humiliation this must have put upon Alice, and the personal shame she must have suffered. To this he added a sharp reflection upon Philip Rose's stewardship. How came it that Philip had allowed this wooden-pated youth to make an ass of himself for a few thousand pounds? Why had he refused to keep so degrading an affair out of the court? Clearly his own absence from England was a great mistake; he had no right to leave Alice to such chances.

There was this in his mind, this and sweeter thoughts of the country and the home he had left, when he heard the well-known voice of the ancient caballero crying to his horses, and perceived the chariot returning up the hill road. Though it was still at a distance he could distinguish at the turn of the way the white feathers of a woman's extravagant hat, and he knew that Isabella was in the carriage, and that their more intimate interview was at hand; but he had ceased to hope much from it, and the desire was growing within him to escape from all this sordid bondage of the pursuit, and to put the seas once more between himself and the supreme folly of his youth. California would tell him nothing; in England he would at least be able to save the woman he loved from the humiliation of financial difficulty. And to this he added a frank fear of the new situation—of the lonely house and the beautiful woman, its mistress, and of that voice which said, "She is your wife."

Isabella stepped from the carriage a little wearily. She was magnificently dressed in a French gown of dark blue cloth and cream lace, and her extravagant hat, utterly unsuited to a journey, would have been more fittingly worn on Fifth Avenue that at San José. Quentin judged that her late appearance at the theatre

had greatly fatigued her. She smiled pleasantly at him, her face wore a kindly expression when she held out both her hands to him, but the old *abandon*, the restless impulse of greeting had disappeared, and it was plain that she had made the journey at some cost.

"Ah, my dear friend, what have you been saying—what have you been thinking of me? So much to tell you, and such long hours to wait—nothing but theatre, theatre, theatre every day and all the days. I tell Juni that I will have no more of it—if he cannot let me rest a little while I will close the door upon them all. Oh, if you knew—and there is nothing else to hope for . . . the theatre always, and then, when one is old, the memory and the regret. Am I not what the English call the Job's comforter? Say that I come to destroy your peace just when you are beginning to love the rancho."

He told her that she was not.

"Your ancient major-domo is a treasure, and the old lady would have given me her boots," he said, answering her question whether they had made him comfortable. "I think your retreat a paradise, and I shall always remember it with pleasure."

"Then let us have breakfast, *bel ami*, and you shall call it lunch. I am positively dying with hunger—and even you do not wish me to die, is it not? Ah, how sweet the air is; how one can breathe here—in one's own country, in one's home!"

Quentin was astonished that so much pathos coloured her words, and he perceived a hidden earnestness behind the question which she appeared to ask so lightly. An instant's reflection convinced him that her detention in San Francisco had not been the outcome of the theatrical trivialities of which she complained, but must be

set down to some change of circumstance which the intervening hours had brought about. What it was he could not so much as imagine—nor when they sat to lunch did she choose to enlighten him. Her manner, as ever, was apparently frank, yet in truth mysterious and elusive. She would speak of everything but the subject he so ardently desired to discuss.

"Juni is what the American calls the hustler," she said cheerfully as they sat down, "gone to-day and here to-morrow. He would have me dance for money in the cab from the depôt—I am not to be myself—Isabella—at all; but some one else, who must dance all the whiles for the little kind Jew gentlemen who own the theatre. God of my life! they are slave-dealers, Quentin; they buy us as they buy their horses. We must not have soul, self; we must not know what life is if we cannot see it over the footlights. When I come back to San José, I say that I will live and die here. Ah, *camarade*, what a life I have led! All gas and lamps, and the paint upon the face, and the people, thousands, below my feet, and the cities so many, and the friends so few—the days so short, the sun so little, and no time at all to say to myself, 'Little friend, you have a home, you could have friends; the grass should be green for you, and there will be shade in the forest.' No, never will I return. I have done with the theatre; I go back no more!"

She had worked herself up almost to a frenzy of declaration, her voice modulating from a low, musical note to a high-pitched key in which she expressed not an angry conviction, but one which must be attended by grave consequences to herself. The pallor of her face, the tired eyes, the restless motion of her hands spoke of mental stress and of some mystery which the

announcement of her determination cloaked. From time to time she cast quick glances about her as though the very words would contradict her desire and forbid it.

He observed that she scarcely heard him when he spoke to her, and that her mind ran continuously upon this protest, that she would not return to the theatre. An unusual excitement animated every phrase that she uttered ; it was very evident that the solitudes of San José would do little for her.

"You do not spare yourself enough," Quentin rejoined when the fit had passed and a calmer mood of mere complaint succeeded to it. "It is the vice of the age ; we have lost the art of moderation. It is bad enough in Europe, but here, in America, you light the candle at both ends and then cut it in the middle. There is only one antidote to such a life as yours : get away from it for a time so far as you can. Do not open your letters—certainly don't answer them. If San José is not far enough away, go South—into the wilderness, if you like. I have gone through it all myself and understand. The gipsy spirit is latent in all of us ; there are times and seasons when it foments in the blood like the virtue in good wine. Then we want a cave, and a desert to put arid wastes between ourselves and civilisation. The craving is often a simple reaction against noise and contention. I have known days when my finest ambition was to lie upon my back upon a river's bank and not to move until the sun set. The busiest men and women suffer most from the gipsy impulse. There is a millionaire in London to-day, who has some half a dozen houses. By preference he spends much of his time in a fishing cottage in Norfolk ; one old woman looks after him there. "Let us get away from the ser-

vants," he has often said to me; "let us go and hide." He can hide in his cottage for a day or two, but in a week's time the gipsy hunger is satisfied; he begins to ask what is doing in town, gets restless, perceives no longer that the grass is green and the sun is shining. Then he flits back to London. The vortex engulfs him."

He told her that the millionaire's case was her own; and, at that, she laughed for the first time.

"You want a month's rest," he resumed; "at least it should be a month's, but I doubt if any one of your temperament could ever make it as much. Probably in ten days' time you will be dying to know what arrangements your friend Juni has made for you; the theatre will seem to you the only place to live in. I put it quite frankly, but it gives me, at the same time, an opportunity of saying something which I have much desired to say. It is simply this, Isabella. If the want of money is keeping you on the stage, you must not remain there a single day. You know perfectly well that I have long wished to make some recognition of your just claims upon me; it is a greater pleasure to do so because you have acted very generously toward me. Few would have done so; I am very sensible of that. But the time has come when I cannot allow the present state of things to continue. Beginning with to-day I insist upon a definite understanding between us. You will receive two thousand pounds a year from me, paid quarterly into any bank in America you like to name. How this will influence your scheme of life it is for you to say. My idea is that you will soon tire of the wilderness; but, at any rate, you will be your own mistress. I should have said all this at the hotel if the opportunity had occurred. It did not, and so I welcomed your invitation to the rancho."

Isabella heard him with unwonted patience. Perhaps she hardly understood the full meaning of his offer, or, it might have been that she became a little incredulous. Regarding him with black eyes open to their widest, smiling kindly as he went on, he found her at the end of it not a whit less perplexing or preoccupied than she had been since first they sat down.

"Ah, *bel ami*," she said with a sigh, "money is very nice, but it is not money always that brings happiness. You and I will always be old friends because of that which happened—oh, so many years ago! If you wish to make me a present, you shall do so, but I will not hear of any claim upon you. We were both so young, so much had happened in both our lives; I had not deserved to be your wife, and when I left you that was the end of it. They told me the news of your good fortune in England, and I was glad. When I went to Knowl the little devil sent me there; I wished to see the lady you had married, but I would not have done you any injury. No one would have known but for that foolish Mr. Rose. People would have said, 'It is only some actress he has known long ago.' Your wife would not have believed it. Why did you come—why were you so headstrong?"

Thus she seemed to give him that opportunity which he had crossed the seas to find. Amazed as he was at her question, he did not lose an instant in following it up.

"You know perfectly well why I came to San Francisco, Isabella. Your own telegram brought me here."

A shadow of something that was not quite frank crossed her face.

"Oh, yes," she said, "but a clever man would have understood that!"

"I am not a clever man. When people make me a promise I expect them to fulfil it. You told Philip Rose that you would give me freedom; I came to America to get it."

She answered him by taking a cigarette from her case and lighting it with incomprehensible deliberation.

"How can I give you your freedom when you are already free?" she said. "When I wrote to Mr. Rose, he knew that it was not serious. How could it have been? I told him in England that our boy and girl marriage was at an end long ago. We were two little children, *vous savez*, just two little wild animals, and we wanted each other for a day; next day we knew it was a mistake, and we went our own way—I wished it, and I think you wished it. You were no longer in love with me, while I could not give a man the love a wife should give—so we went, as the English say, our own roads. All this I said to Mr. Rose in London, and he should have known better than to let you come to America."

"Then you were absolutely jesting with me?"

She turned away her eyes, and scattered the ashes from her cigarette into the rose bowl.

"A woman never knows that," she said; "perhaps my vanity asked you to come, *bel ami*—perhaps I was very much alone, and wanted a friend. Who knows? We forget so quickly why it was—the theatre excites us. To-day we dance, to-morrow we cry. Forgive me, but say that it is so——"

"I forgive you freely—you had the right to ask me to come; but since you understand my position you must not be unaware of my anxieties. The time has gone by for any make-believe. I will tell you in all earnestness that I regard the girl that I have left in England as my wife in the eyes of God and man. Your confession

in Paris did her a great injury. She cannot live with me, I cannot live with her again until I am her husband legally as well as morally. When you wrote to Philip Rose, I believed you to be aware of some fact which would have made our marriage in San Francisco invalid. I see that it is not so—but I do not reproach you because you asked me to come to you. You were within your right, and you had this claim upon me."

She shook her head, protesting almost angrily.

"I have no claim, *bel ami;* it was no marriage, ours. How could it be, out here in this wild country? Does that bind you in England? Of course it does not; you are her husband in the English law. My friends all tell me that; Mr. Rawdon, he told me so when he came to see me in London."

"Mr. Rawdon, who is he?"

"Mr. Philip Rose's friend—who watched me night and day. Oh, he is chivalrous, your Mr. Rose—he knows that you are married, and he asks you to run away and leave your little wife to him. Then you come—you are blind, and I am the one to open your eyes, Quentin. If I had not been your friend, would I have left London as I did? Who was to send me away if I did not wish to go? No, I came because I would not vex an old comrade. Mr. Rawdon himself said that your marriage was a good marriage. He called me an adventuress—me, Isabella, and I answered him as my countrywomen answer. They say he ran all the way from my house to the station. God of my life! I was angry that day; and now they tell me that he is here in California; he came to the theatre when I danced; he has been many times to my hotel. How is that if your friend Mr. Rose did not send him? Are you two going to hunt a woman down because you

knew her long ago? I will not believe it of you, *camarade;* but the other, the old man, let him leave me alone, or it shall not be good for him, I swear it."

Quentin looked at her as if she had asked him to believe some splendid fable told by her wild imagination. He had ever set his face so resolutely against espionage where she was concerned that this account of it angered him to the last point. Passionately he told her that it was none of his doing. He had desired her happiness; he had crossed the seas to save her from her misfortunes, to build her a home, and to provide generously for her necessities. The events of her life were nothing to him; he protested that he had long forfeited the right either to praise or to blame her. That she should have been watched in his name seemed nothing less than an outrage; he could not sufficiently atone for such an insult, he said, and even yet must be convinced that Philip Rose had incited this impertinent intruder to the task. To all of which the stately Isabella did but smile and shake her head a little incredulously; and then, changing the subject with a word, as she was wont to do, she asked him if it were true that there had been a stranger about the rancho last night, as the Ancient had told her. This question cut instantly across the line of his thought, and he answered it with a gesture of scorn.

"A tramp, exhilarated by the bracing air and whiskey, fired off a gun—perhaps under the impression that it was Thanksgiving Day."

"Did you see the man—are you sure that it was a tramp?"

"I neither saw him nor questioned him about his ancestry. The old man let loose the dogs, and they enjoyed a brief hour. Why do you ask me? That

kind of man moves on; he will be ten miles from here to-day stealing boots from a store. I did not give the matter a second thought."

He answered her over-sharply, perhaps, for his mind still ran upon his own troubles, and the perilous situation to which they had brought him; but when he looked up suddenly and caught her glance, he perceived that her face had lost all its colour, while her eyes shifted with that anxious, wandering gaze, as of an animal hunted, which he had first noticed when she arrived that morning. Instantly he divined that her interest was her own, and that she knew perfectly well who had come to the rancho.

"I am hot and tired, my friend," she cried, rising from the table suddenly, "let us have the horses out and ride a little way. It will do me good, Quentin, and I will show you the woods. Come, do you not wish it? Then let us go at once."

He nodded assent and set out with her. Mystery hovered about them as they went, and while she, fearing a great danger, welcomed a brave man's company, he seemed to know that some grave peril threatened her, and that her need of him was sore.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AN UNOPENED LETTER

It as a hot night of July at Shiplake when Philip Rose walked across to the Warren from the station by the river, and asked the trim maidservant if the Lady Alice were at home. The girl's answer that her ladyship had been out in the sailing-boat, but was expected back to dinner, seemed to stimulate his impatience, and, passing through the house to the river's bank, he peered up and down towards Noble's and the islands as though to discern the subject of his quest and to hasten her coming.

These had been trying months for Philip. The great trust, which Quentin had bequeathed to him, so welcome in the earlier days, so absorbing now, began to present problems he had entirely ignored when he accepted it. A man of some character as men go nowadays, had he foreseen whither the road was leading him he would never have set foot on it at Caird's request. For, in plain truth, it had come to this, that he must confess to himself an overmastering love for his friend's wife, and admit a passion which threatened finally to engulf him in a cataclysm wherein all should be lost. Rarely twenty-four hours passed now but that he brought some message to Alice, came to consult her upon a business

affair, or was privileged to speak to her with that close understanding which is something more than friendship. An optimist for his friend's sake, Quentin's continued absence had not entered into his reckoning when Philip undertook the trust. It would be an affair of a month, he said; he used to tell Alice almost daily that her husband might return by the next boat. Then came doubt and delay, letters from Chicago, letters from San Francisco, vague promises, protestations of despair, which found a stauncher friend in England. Believing Quentin to be nothing less than a victim of clever adventurers, Philip had recourse again to the firm of Rawdon, Carr and Clerk; he despatched a confidential agent to America that he might know the truth. The firm sent out that ancient philosopher whom Philip had first met at Baker Street Station in the hour of crisis, and from him came these tidings which Philip carried to Shiplake upon that night of July, and feared to deliver lest their recital should betray him.

He was an honest man, and he had striven to act honestly throughout this terrible affair. It was not by any fault of his, by any wish of his, that temptation had come to him. An introspective judgment, delivered in calmer hours, put the case with a judicial firmness which would have exonerated him in the eyes of other men, and yet left something wanting when he would have claimed its acquittal for himself. While it seemed that this friend might return at any hour to demand an account of his stewardship, his course was clear enough; but how, he began to ask, if Quentin never returned; how if he left this friendless girl for ever at the dictates of a stupendous folly which the priests had taught him? Was it Philip's duty to accept this position as final; had Alice no right of freedom upon her side?

Marriage would re-establish her fortunes. If Quentin's conscience kept him in America, then in God's name, let justice be done in England. To Philip the very contemplation of this freedom had become a torture; he believed that Alice would marry him—so little did he know or understand her.

The old church clock struck the hour of six while Philip waited in the garden of the Warren. Many boats were out upon the river; steam launches went swirling by upon their way to Henley or to Sonning, punters came lazily round the bend from Shiplake, often encouraged in their labours by the tinkling mandoline or the tuneless banjo. The first hush of night, nowhere heard with gentler voice than upon the placid waters of old Thames, modulated those laughing notes of pleasure, and made them welcome to the ear. A hazy vapour drifted lazily above the outer ramparts of the hills; the western sky spread out a mighty canopy of crimson flame which the lapping waves caught up in gathered jewels of the light. When Philip espied Alice, her boat drifted to a breath of the night wind and appeared like some great white bird coming down proudly upon the sluggish stream; while she herself, sitting in the stern sheets with one hand upon the tiller, the other catching the spindrift from the little waves about her ship, wore that air of weary content so characteristic of woman in some of her moods. To Philip, it appeared that the trial had but enhanced her beauty, added a charm of seriousness to an always expressive face, and developed in her those latent qualities which he always believed her to possess. He was pleased that she welcomed him with such a sweet smile and that her impulsive greeting left him in no doubt of her sincerity.

"I was just thinking of you," she said, as she put her

boat about, and brought it skilfully to the landing-stage; "you always come at sunset, Philip."

"Not an omen, I hope. I had to see Percival this afternoon, and, of course, he was late."

"Percy will be late for his own funeral," she said as he helped her out. "Is there any fresh disgrace, Philip; will it all come into court again?"

"It certainly will not. We have now arranged the composition—he pays his debts in full; I have seen to that."

He did not mean to deceive her, nor to deny the plain truth that Quentin had cabled from America instructing him to do what he had done; but none the less he allowed her to thank him, which she did with some warmth.

"My dear Philip, if you knew how many letters of condolence I have in the drawer upstairs, and all from my dearest friends. Some of them will cut me if Percy pays every one. How can he possibly do it? Where is the money to come from? You don't mean to say that Quentin has sent it?"

Philip admitted that the money must come from Quentin.

"I shall take the responsibility upon myself," he said. "Quentin is as much concerned as any of us. Besides, it is only fashionable, all said and done, and a man has no real title to a page in Burke nowadays unless he has been to Carey Street. No one thinks anything of a boy's debts."

"Except the creditors, Philip. Did Percy say that he was coming down to see me; did he send any message?"

"He sent a letter, and one from his friend Emden. I like that young lawyer; it is something to Percy's account that he has such a friend."

"But you did not come down to-night to speak of Mr. Emden?" she suggested, and she looked him full in the face with those searching blue eyes he used not to fear.

"No," he said, avoiding her gaze. "I have had a letter from America; it came by this morning's mail."

"Then there will be one for me to-night, too," she rejoined quickly.

And there upon the hall table the letter lay, stamped with the blue American stamp, and written in Quentin's bold and unmistakable hand.

Alice took the letter up eagerly; and Philip could perceive how inopportunely his own news must come to her. He had meant to speak to her to-night as he had never spoken before; he believed that the time was ripe for an understanding between them, and he would submit no longer to that artifice of reservation by which their relations hitherto had been made possible. To-night he would say to her, "You must make your choice; you must compel Quentin to be frank with you." He wondered if the letter from America would help or defeat him.

"We will have dinner at once," she said at the stair's foot, standing there, a pretty picture in her close-fitting white gown and a French straw hat with a great pink feather in it. "Edna is over at the Raynhams—she will not be back until nine, so we can talk. I suppose you are going up by the last train, Philip?"

"Absolutely imperative," he said; "I have promised to see Lady Alcester to-night."

"Then I won't even change my dress," she said, and so ran up, and he heard her door shut.

She shut the door of the room, and, going to the window whence she could look down to the garden of

her roses, she began to read Quentin's letter. The first line, the very first, brought the blood to her cheek as it had not run there for many a long week. Tears almost of passionate gratitude shone in her glad eyes; she put the letter down, scarcely daring to read it—took it up again, and could not see the lines because of her tears; stood many minutes listening to the river's voice and the distant music of the passing boats. He was coming home to her, he, the man whom absence and sorrow and suffering had taught her to love beyond any on God's earth—he was coming back to her, to stand side by side with her before the whole world, to answer to those who judged her, to take up that burden she could no longer bear alone. For the rest she cared not; for the traditions of men or the creeds of Churches, for the slander of the evil or the distrust of the good; Quentin was coming back—the night whispered it; the bird's note echoed it; the great flaming sky wrote the message incarnadined in letters of crimson fire. Quentin, her husband, was coming back. She knelt at her bedside and gave thanks to God.

"Dearest wife," he wrote, "my resolution is taken. I am coming home to you. It may be that I come with some better hope than I dare to speak of in this letter; it may be that I shall ask you to decide now and for ever if your love for me will face the judgment of the world and disregard its verdicts. I am in California still, in the rancho of which I spoke to you. Isabella is with me, but she is a changed woman, so changed that I begin to read some greater mystery than that of my own story in her life. Good friends I have here, and they are helping me—whatever the truth be which is kept from me, it cannot, I feel, be hidden much longer. Sometimes I dare to believe that it will be all I ask—

my reward for these weary weeks of despair and exile; there are other days when I find in it no more than a woman's vanity playing with me and keeping me at her side that others may be drawn there. I will not judge her or the circumstances; but I am determined that nothing now, either of my conscience or of that false conception of duty which sent me here, shall delay my departure hence. I return to you, dearest wife—I return to my home. I have no longer an alternative; my conscience bids me go and I hear your voice calling me."

The letter was still in Alice's hands when the gong sounded for dinner, and she remembered that Philip Rose waited for her below. Pausing but a moment to give a direction to her maid, she ran downstairs and found Philip waiting for her at the foot of them. One look at her flushed face, the letter still crumpled between her agitated fingers, sent out to him such a message as comes, it may be, but once in a man's life, a message which says, "Here is the answer to your unspoken thoughts; here is the gate upon that difficult road you are treading." In that instant he knew that he had been saved from a word of which he would have repented to his life's end. The insidious fabric of opportunity crumbled and went to dust as he watched her. He awoke from the dream almost with a start, and became aware that she was speaking to him.

"I am going to town by the last train, Philip," she said; "we will go together."

For the briefest instant of time his vanity responded to this swift surprise and led him to ask himself if he might connect his own departure with her sudden resolution; but the hope passed when he looked at her again, and understood that some greater meaning must be read of the words.

"You are going to town—to St. James's Court?"

"Not to St. James's Court, Philip—to the Carlton Hotel."

"You are not serious, Alice?"

"People rarely are when they go to the Carlton."

"But—does Lady Alcester know?"

"My dear Philip, am I at a boarding-school?"

"Oh, of course, I have nothing to say—the Carlton by all means. Do you intend to stay there long—I suppose I am privileged to ask that?"

"I am staying there until my husband's return from America."

"Good God! is Quentin coming back?"

"He is coming back, Philip."

She looked up at him unflinchingly, as though now she dared to let him know that she understood what had been in his mind—not the knowledge of reproach, but the intimation that the shadow was passing, and that a near day would show them the light. During the brief and hurried dinner few words were spoken between them. He was as a man dragged by a strong hand back to sanctity and duty; she, on her part, became possessed of the idea to flee this remote house as though it had been her prison. London, with what a voice it called her! London with its blaze of lights; its ceaseless tongue of pleasure; London, where the world was—she was going back to it, going to face all slander, all judgment, all scorn, all contumely. Desire of the battle nerved her; she lived again for the first time for long weeks. The old energy seemed reborn in an instant; she was the Alice of the Park and the Bois—the Alice of Knowl and the hunting-field; no obstacle affrighted her; no difficulty might speak of delay.

They arrived at Paddington, Edna Elsen with them,

at ten minutes past eleven, and were at the doors of the Carlton by five-and-twenty minutes to twelve. The hour was that of the theatre supper, and the great crimson dining-room, with its blaze of light and colour, welcomed her as to some familiar scene long deserted, but never forgotten. Nor would she ever forget the effect of the sensuous music upon nerves long accustomed to the hush of the waters and the melancholy breezes from the hills. The very fiddles could touch a responsive chord at once exhilarating and assuring, as though upon this wave of sweet sounds a haven of rest and finality might be reached. And she had not been ten seconds in the hotel when a loud voice greeted her, and turning about, she perceived the venomous Lady Anne, and, in the distance, Dicky and Bobby Fenton.

"The very last person in the world! My dear child, do you want to kill us with joy?"

"Well, it's better than grief, Lady Anne. We have just come up from Henley."

"To do a little shopping, I suppose? I have just left your mother at the opera. She had a terrible headache, poor dear; the General has taken her to the Savoy to see a consulting physician. Are you supping, Alice? Was that Philip Rose I saw in the cab? But perhaps you've come to see a consulting physician, too?"

"No," said Alice, very slowly, "I have come here to wait for my husband, who is returning from America, Lady Anne."

The Lady Anne blushed for the first time for many years. She had spent the last two months of her life in the keen enjoyment of what was known as the Caird scandal. As in a flash the doors of a King's Bench Court seemed to open and invite her within.

"You don't mean to say that he is coming back?"

"I don't say it—he cables it. I'm sure you congratulate me, Lady Anne?"

"My dear child, I have said from the first that all this wicked slander would recoil upon the heads of those who put it about. If I were in your shoes, my lawyers should begin to-morrow, and they wouldn't go far for their fees. But it's no business of mine, and I am not the one to speak. Ask that Westerham woman what she has to say and then talk of charity——"

Lady Dicky came up at the moment, and greeted Alice with a loud and gushing salute which beat the band "into fits," as Bobby Fenton said, and attracted universal attention to the group.

"You are supping, dear, of course?"

"But look at my gown, Dicky."

"I am looking at it—the blue goes like anything with crimson and old gold."

"Meaning Mr. Rily's chairs——"

"And my champagne," said Bobby Fenton. "Please come, Lady Alice, she isn't so dreadful when you're on the scene."

"Poor man, your responsibilities are very great."

"Yes, I'm getting to a time of life when a man begins to feel that yesterday was rather better than to-morrow—it's Dicky's fault; you ask her!"

"He lost a hundred at Newmarket to-day, and isn't in his right senses yet. Do come along; they turn the lights out here just when you're having your soup."

"Lucky too, sometimes," said Bobby Fenton. "I know a fellow who was supping here last week, and the lights went out just when *her* husband came in—it was nothing less than providential."

Lady Anne had no time for a discreet question as to who the lady in question might be, for Dicky rushed

Alice into the restaurant, and before she quite understood the nature of the ordeal, she found herself at a table laid for five, where she had Bobby Fenton upon one side, and Dicky upon the other; while Edna Elsen, who never betrayed surprise at anything, was next to the old lady, who immediately began to cross-examine her as to their life at Wargrave. "And didn't I tell her some fibs!" the girl said to Alice afterwards, as though this really were a meritorious action.

Three months had passed since Alice took any part in the social roundabout which serves London for its pleasures; many who last year bent the knee to her in the hour of her triumphs had almost forgotten her very existence, or, if they remembered her, it was as one whom disaster had engulfed. So her appearance without any rumour of warning in the restaurant of the Carlton came as a very dower of inspiration to flagging tongues, turned every head to gaze after her, and left at many a table the question, "What does she here?" Gentlemen of the chosen race supping with the chosen glories of the sixpenny papers, hazarded the opinion that she had come to town to get a divorce; less critical tongues declared that she was more beautiful than ever; an inner circle surmised that there must be something in the stories which connected her name with Danby's. She was aware of all this, and knew not whether it pleased or appalled her. The swift excitement of her resolution deserted her basely now. After all, how should Quentin's coming home alter the existing facts, or make them better? She was not his wife; her threats against those who slandered her were impotent enough. At Wargrave she had shut herself away from malice and its malignity—she could not do so here in London, where every day loosed the tongues anew, and every

night brought the silence of reckoning. Courage alone and the desperation of courage enabled her to fight the battle. Quentin was coming home; she believed that he could save her. And so she faced them all in the great restaurant, and laughed with Dicky, and fenced with the irascible Lady Anne, and tried to make believe that all was as it had been a year ago; nothing changed, nothing lacking in that mad scheme of life she then made her own. But in her own bedroom afterwards, when the lights were out and London's roar forbade her to sleep, she lay long asking sleep to come to her; and as she lay she seemed to bridge the gulf of the seas, and to stretch out weak arms to the strong hands that would save her.

The letter, how much it meant to her!

But that other letter from Percy's friend, Mr. Emden, the lawyer!

Why, she had never opened that, and yet it contained tidings so precious that had she known of them, she would have thought no price too high for their possession.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE CRITICAL HOUR

QUENTIN had written to Alice that he was coming home, but the realisation of his determination met many obstacles. And the chief of these was Isabella's fear of being left at the rancho—a fear which grew upon her with the days, and was not to be explained upon any common hypothesis.

"I have many enemies; they wish me to go back to the theatre. If you leave me, I have no friend. Stay a little while; it can be nothing to you whether you go in one week or three. We are old enough friends that I should ask you—please humour me in this."

He knew not what to make of it. His dread, a physical dread, of facing the ordeal of this temptation no longer existed in the face of the new alarm; nor could he accept her explanations as a sufficient reason for delay. All her old verve of life had left the brilliant Isabella; many of her hours were given to a kind of reverie, in which she appeared to be combating long-forgotten memories; she even reminded Quentin of his chivalrous offers, saying—"You call me your wife; then let it be so for a few weeks until my health has come back to me, and I am strong again."

He was a man of quick judgments, and, needless to

say, some shrewd idea of her trouble quickly occurred to him; and he associated it with the strange events attending his arrival at the rancho. None the less the mystery remained, and no answer could satisfy a vague hypothesis. Who had been in the wood, and why had he, Quentin, been picked out for a mad vengeance? He could not tell. The days did not enlighten him. A letter from his friend Dillon, couched in vague language, advised him to quit San José without delay. He was not a coward, and he remained.

A week had passed since his letter home was written when the second episode of this growing mystery permitted Quentin a further if far from welcome knowledge of it. He had set out with Isabella for a ride through the forest late in the afternoon of an exceedingly hot and unpleasant day—rare in California; and these two being alone upon a bridle-path in one of the higher pine-woods, she reined her horse in suddenly, and declared that they were followed. But this was not the whole of it, for when she uttered the words her face was so ghastly pale, and her eyes shone with so strange a light that Quentin could imagine no danger of man or beast to warrant such an outbreak, and although he reined his horse with her, he answered her almost with impatience—

"My dear Isabella, California evidently does not agree with your nerves."

"God help me, it does not!" she said quickly. "I shall be an old woman if I live through many days of this."

"This being a supposed bogey who fired a pistol because the humour took him?"

"It is not that," she rejoined; "you can never know what it is, Quentin, or what I have suffered because of it."

And then almost in terror she cried—

"Listen, there are footsteps behind us; I hear them distinctly. Let us gallop, Quentin—do not let us stay in this dreadful place. Ah, dear God, how long must it last, how long? And I am a woman and alone."

She set her horse at a wild gallop, and he followed her amazed. The track was a rugged one, broken by creeping roots and steep hollows, and great boulders of rock and earth. Fine rider that he was, Quentin could keep his seat with difficulty, and after the half of a mile he implored her to stop for God's sake. The rancho came to their view now, and seemed to give her courage.

"These fancies come to me so oddly," she said. "I am mad while they last, Quentin. Please forgive me, and do not speak of it."

"If you would tell me a little more, Isabella," he answered, "I might be able to promise that they should not trouble you again. But I will not press it upon you. Go back to the house while I ride the way we came. If there were really footsteps, we may as well know to whom they belong. There can be no harm in that, surely."

She was very unwilling, forbidding him to go, and pressing him to ride on to the house with her, so that in the end he made an appearance of consenting, and, riding with her so far as the gate of the rancho, he pretended to take the horses to the stables; but when he had delivered hers to the ancient caballero, he himself set off to the woods swiftly in the dusk, and soon regained the path which led to the scene of her agitation. It was nearly dark then, and the sun had become but a fiery line of crimson in the west. From time to time a wood-bird uttered a cooing note high up in the

canopy of leaves which hid the grey zenith ; twigs bent and cracked as though released from the burden of the sun ; the slightest sound was magnified until it seemed to be a whisper of the forest's voice, calling as the *muezzin* to rest and sleep. Nor was this eerie hour without its effect upon a man long tried by mystery and trouble. Quentin found himself responsive to the forest mood, yet frankly afraid of it. The odd notion came to him that somewhere amidst these trees there lurked the image of the stupendous myth his chivalry had too long worshipped ; that to-night he would come face to face with it in the valley of the shadow, and emerge thence to light and life. It was a faith lacking all reason, but he believed it ; and, believing, he rode on deeper into the heart of the wood, and watched the last glimmer of day ebb away from the distant horizon and leave a girdle of night about the whole heaven, and in the forest a darkness so intense that even his horse stood afraid of it. Then he said that it were vain to go on, and, turning the beast about, he would have regained the rancho, when a wild, unnatural cry, like to nothing he had ever heard on land or sea, struck upon his ear as some knell of woe so unutterable that even the good horse quivered and trembled beneath him, and the sweat stood upon his brow as though in this hour of his life he had encountered some terrible figure from an unknown world, and it had beckoned him.

Who called ? Whence came the sounds? The wood deceived him. In Southern Europe he would have said that it was a mad wolf howling ; but here in California this simple explanation was forbidden him, and his ears turned now to the right, now to the left, in the vain hope that he could name the place of the sounds and ride out to it. But whoever cried so

woefully moved swiftly from place to place; and Quentin began to believe it to be a trick; he remembered the mad attack attending his first night at the rancho, and, drawing his revolver, he sat like a statue, waiting for some revelation. How still it became in that moment. The voice of Nature, heard truly in such moments as these, spoke of the spirit world and man's soul, lifting up the heart above the darkness to the Supreme Creator, and insisting upon eternity. Never had Quentin been able to review his past life so swiftly; he was as one who stood apart from it, and could weigh each act in the balance dispassionately, saying, "This was wisdom, this was folly." He seemed at the uttermost ends of the earth, driven out, exiled, cut off finally and for ever from all he had loved or hoped for. And then the horrid voice startled him from his reverie; it cried out from the very ground beneath him, and he, in an instant of panic that passed as swiftly, fired his revolver into the undergrowth, and was answered by a mocking laugh, long-drawn and terrible as the cry of a hyena.

The gun-shot broke the spell, and man and horse went scrambling along the broken path. Fitful summer lightning now played about the hills and gave momentary intervals of light to a scene of utter darkness. From the far distance there came a sound of a railway syren and of church bells chiming musically; the great trees took strange shapes and extended monster arms as though to protect from the heaven above the hidden creatures of the forest below. By them, through close coppices, and across open glades the frightened horse kept the path with the sure instinct of the brute. When Quentin mastered him at last, he did not for a little while hear any sounds, and the wailing cry arose no

more. In truth he would have laughed at himself but for an indefinable dread, a sensation that he was again in the presence of the inhuman thing, and would hear it anon. And this grew upon him with the minutes until the impulse to ride for very life toward the rancho possessed him, and could hardly be controlled. With such an impulse he was battling still, when from the wood upon his left hand there came out to him a low, gasping sob like that of a man robbed of his breath and fighting for very life; and, determined no longer to obey a craven voice, he drove his horse into the thicket, and in a flash of the heavens, instantaneous but sufficient, he saw the man, and recoiled from him with a cry he could not suppress, a fear and aversion so terrible that he did not believe he might ever speak of them to men.

It was a mad race home now, a swift flight, not of fear but of unimaginable dread. A thousand unconnected thoughts seeking the story of it all hither, thither, pursued him and left him without help or idea. What was the meaning of that unnameable horror of the wood; of that figure crouching like a brute at the tree's foot, and snarling at those who approached? He asked if this were the key to the mystery which kept Isabella at the rancho; and suddenly at the thought he cried aloud, "God help her!" For he knew that the man was a raving madman, and he believed that he had seen his face before.

She waited for him at the porch when he rode up, and it was plain that she suspected his return to the woods, although she did not immediately speak of it. The shelter of the rancho appeared to give her courage, and she made as though to laugh off the adventure and to turn its meaning by a light word.

"I have been so long in the cities that the country frightens me," she said. "When nothing happens one has so much time to think. If I were an angel, Quentin, with real white wings, I would not mind the dark places; but I have too much imagination. My eyes are like the cat's; I see in the dark, and the pictures are not pretty."

And then with a quick interrogation of her black eyes she asked him—

"Did you go far; did you meet any one, Quentin?"

He answered her evasively—

"No one that you would know. Please don't think any more about it. There is the dinner gong; we shall be late."

"Ah," she cried a little sadly, "the dinner gong is the beginning and end of most things, is it not, *mon ami?*"

This night they dined alone in a pretty panelled room whose windows looked out towards San José. Isabella had few friends in that city, her acquaintances of old time having mostly gone South in a vain flight from the gringo; but the priests came over occasionally to dine at the rancho, and there had been a visit from the girls of an old Spanish family, the Estenegas. For the most part, however, the population was a nomadic one, consisting largely of wealthy San Franciscans, who arrived at San José on Saturday and quitted it on Monday. The nearest house to the rancho was that of Robert Martin, the financier, who lived some half a mile down the road toward Santa Clara. Remoteness and isolation were the principal charms of the place at ordinary times, but Quentin could not help confessing to-night that he would have welcomed some mitigation of them. It was plain to him that affairs had come to a crisis in the lives of this woman and himself. What-

ever shadow lay upon her adventurous life; whatever had come into it; the fact remained, that a few short days had changed her utterly from the brave and splendid creature of the theatre to the victim of a mystery which clearly terrified her. And now it seemed that the complement of her secret was his own; that he had found it out there in the darkness of the woods, and that he believed that it might be watching them even as they sat. The simplest deduction put it to him that this victim of supreme and terrible misfortune had been known to Isabella in other days, yet so known that she did not dare to speak of him. His presence at San José implied a determination to force recognition upon her—it might be to blackmail her; and, if this were so, common humanity said that Quentin must remain at the rancho, must hear this story to the end, whatever it was, and convince himself that the last word of it was spoken before he thought of Europe and his home. Had Isabella been frank with him all would have been so easy, but he could see that any attempt to question her was attended by a renewal of the agitation she had suffered in the wood, and he abandoned his questions speedily, though he tried to tell her of his intention to remain.

"You are not cut out for a country life, Isabella," he said, as they sat at the table watching the twinkling lights of San José far down the valley. "Why don't you go East, again? It seemed to me that you were far happier in Europe; if I had your interest in Spain and Spanish things I should know where to settle down. They say that living is very cheap in Madrid; you would get any number of engagements—why not go back there for the autumn, at any rate?"

A shadow of weariness crossed her handsome face.

"No, no," she said quickly, "I have done with all that. I cannot tell you what it is, but I feel that I shall never go to the theatre again. Perhaps it is only because I am tired, so very tired, of it all. Wherever I go the men run after me, and they say, 'Do this, do that, and we will make your fortune.' It is not my fortune, but their own that they wish to make. A clever woman has so many birds of prey about her—I have seen so much of it. They rob me and then they say, 'Look at the advertisement you are getting.' The little fortune that I have is enough for me in California, but if I go to Europe it will be little enough. I am afraid of it, Quentin; it is so far away. I cannot face all those strange people. No, I shall die in California; something has told me that for many days now. I am not a superstitious woman, but I know it, and am not sorry. My life is lived; why should I regret it?"

The pathos of it troubled him; not the pathos of the childish superstition, but of the shadow which was creeping upon this strange life. Had it been slower to come, less swift and subtle, he would have been better prepared to advise her, and to offer her that protection which a man alone can give to a woman against whom men have conspired. But this mystery was, comparatively, of yesterday; he did not believe that it had existed while they were in San Francisco together. There she had been the vivacious, sprightly, careless creature of the theatre and the Bohemian city; no difficulty had daunted her, a pretty philosophy met all anxious questions philosophically. Here, at San José, she had grown old, as it were, in a day. No common story would account for such a change; he knew of no page in her life which justified such fear and foreboding as she now declared. She had not been a bad woman;

many traits in her character won his profound homage, for while he found her frivolous and vain and childish and spoiled, she appeared to have kept herself free from any graver charges and to be entitled to the respect of honest men. Then what did she fear from this apparition from the woods, or was it that at all? God alone knew. The rancho was becoming every hour an abode of intolerable nightmares; this fair woodland scene began to wear down even his iron nerve and affright him with a premonition of evil he could not name. And upon it all was the woman's word—"My day is done—to-night I shall end it for ever, Quentin." What answer could he make to her—what logic would meet a folly at once so hysterical and so irrational?

They sat late that night, talking with the intimacy of an old-time friendship of much that had happened in both their lives. Particularly she spoke of the wearing care of a "star's" existence, the constant journeyings to and fro, of successes and disappointments, of the changing favour of cities, and the army of rogues by whom a successful woman is followed. She told him how her career had suffered from her Spanish heritage of indifference to the present and a profound belief in to-morrow. "If I had been the mother of children, it would have been so different," she said. "What was there to live for. Once in my life there was a story; I thought I saw a clear star so far away and yet to be mine; but it was not to be, and I do not complain. I am glad now that it happened so. A woman who has no courage can never escape the chains which her birth puts upon her. I could never have loved any man long; it is not in my blood. The theatre is my home; I was born to it; and if I live I shall go back to the theatre when the winter comes. That is what you

call destiny. I say that I shall go back, and yet I know that it will never be. Laugh at me, but remember that I told you——"

His reply was a renewal of that offer he had made to her so frequently since he returned to California.

"Let me find you a home in Europe," he said; "or if not in Europe, anywhere you care to name here in California. It is my duty, Isabella. Don't forbid me to do it. I am returning to London in a few days' time. I shall go with a heavy heart if you do not grant me my wish. Let me know that all is well with you, and my own path is straighter. It is such a little thing—to me. They call me a millionaire—what is the good of it if it does not mean that I have more counters than the majority with which to play the game of life? You have every right to share them—why do you refuse me?"

"I will tell you some day," she said sadly. "Go back to Europe, Quentin; your place is there. I shall always say 'God bless you!'—perhaps I shall say it for long years after you have forgotten me. Go back, my friend—there is no duty which keeps you here. I wish it from my heart—go back to your home and believe that I have never willingly done you any injury."

Her manner perplexed him, but he was wise enough to see that this was no moment to pursue the unconsidered and irresponsible words which fell from her tired lips. The belief that some real danger from without might threaten her, after all, kept him staunch to his purpose not to leave her in this desolate place until her safety were provided for. In these moods—hers of veiled and mysterious prophecy, his of consciousness of a new responsibility toward her—they went to their bedrooms shortly before the hour of midnight, and Quentin heard her lock the door and then close the shutters which gave

upon the verandah. Tired as he was, he had no intention whatever of sleeping. Be her fancies what they might, he respected them; and he could not rid himself of the idea that the man he had seen in the wood was the one who had brought this shadow so swiftly upon her.

Who was he—whence had he come? The silence of the night assisted his memory, and Quentin recollected that he had seen this man before in China City when Joe Dillon had compelled him to go to the cellars. Yes, an open door showed him this very face; he remembered that he had remarked the pity of it, and declared to his friend Dillon that the insanity of dreams should find a place in his studies. Opium had made a madman of the once handsome young sailor. And yet if it were true, as well it might be, that he was seeking Isabella out, then there had been a day in her life when she had known this man—it might be had loved him. Or was he but a needy kinsman driving her to the last point by his importunities and perhaps threatening her by the disclosure of some secret she did not dare to tell the world? A few hours would make his story known; perchance this very night of watching.

It is one thing to determine to watch through the night; it is another to put such a project into execution. Despite his resolution, Quentin dozed more than once during his self-imposed vigil; and when the clocks of San José struck two, that seductive philosophy which precedes the full content of sleep insinuated the needless and timid folly of remaining awake. All said and done, there was no proof whatever that the man who had dogged them during these later days had so much as even seen Isabella. The fellow was probably some pitiful outcast from the Southern Islands; he shunned his fellow-men,

and would be by them shunned. So the argument ran in the spell of fatigue and conquering sleep. Quentin awoke with a brave effort and lit a pipe; when three o'clock struck the pipe was out and he was fast asleep in his chair. It was a quarter past three exactly when a loud cry rang out through the house and waked every inmate by the weird and terrible nature of it. Not so much was it a cry of fear as of positive agony and grief—a haunting, heart-stilling cry never to be forgotten by those who heard it at the rancho.

Quentin sprang up from his chair, the haunting sounds echoing in his ears; and calling back his wits with that supreme effort a man makes in the face of danger, he snatched up his revolver from the table and ran out into the corridor. There he met the old dame face to face; she carried a rude candlestick in her hands and shook from head to foot with fear as one trembling with the ague. Behind her in the shadows were the maids; the group spoke of his own delay, but not one of them could answer his agitated questions, and he abandoned them for commands.

"Go to Madame," he said; "go in and see. I will follow you if any one is there."

He beat at Isabella's door as he spoke. Not a sound answered him, not so much as the whisper of a voice. The quaking maids could say nothing but "Jesu"; the old woman gibbered like an animal; but her grief was very real.

"It was she, señor—my own mistress! Oh, God, dear God—that I should have heard it! Please be quick—break down the door, señor. Oh, Mother of Saints, pray for us; Jesu pity us!"

The door was stout and refused to give even to that tremendous shoulder. Again and again Quentin hurled

himself upon it; the panels creaked, the hinges strained, but the door still held. And the delay was maddening, insupportable; the silence invited all the wild fears which imagination could provoke. Quentin could not suffer it longer; he ran from the house and, gaining the porch of the entrance hall, he lifted himself with strong hands to the verandah, and so found her room. A single glance at the broken shutter convinced him that whoever had frightened Isabella had entered as he entered; the light woodwork had been torn away by a clumsy hand; the glass beyond it was splintered. He wondered at his own heavy sleep; and wondering, he paused upon the threshold, afraid even then of the dread truth that darkened room might harbour.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE LIGHT FALLS DIMLY

WHAT lay beyond? Was Isabella within the room, or had she fled from it? Did she live, or had the cry been that of death? So went the whirling thoughts as he waited on the threshold. But an instant of time they claimed; and yet how much might be hazarded, how much dreaded in that woeful interval! In after years he could have written for you every line of that mental page which uncertainty then dictated to him.

The shutter was broken; the long window behind it unlatched. Quentin thrust it open with a wild gesture, and entering the room, he remembered that he had no matches. Not once since he had arrived at the rancho had he visited this apartment; the moonless night gave him no aid, and the night was such that he could not see his hand before his face. A situation so full of terrible suggestion no mind could have imagined; for while he feared to move a step lest movement should discover all, impatience, and upon impatience fear, so wrought upon his nerves that he was as one paralysed and voiceless. Good God, what awful secret did the silence and the darkness cloak! The sweat ran down his face when he asked himself the question. And yet

he forced himself to go on, while he uttered her name aloud and implored an answer.

"Isabella—it is I, Quentin! Why do you not speak? Isabella—oh! my God!—why do you not answer me?"

Not a whisper responded to the low, agonised words; and unable any longer to bear the suspense, he began to cross the room with stealthy tread, fearing at each step that his foot might betray the truth and yet wildly desirous of the light and its answer. The flooring of the room was a parquet as his own; but two or three steps brought him to a soft Persian mat, and then his outstretched hand touched the woodwork of a table, and he felt the outline of a book lying there and of a lamp beside it. But there were no matches there, and when he moved again, his arm struck the table and it fell with a crash, and he started back as though a living hand had closed upon his own.

Had the table fallen by his own agency or another's? Such was the fatuous question his panic compelled him to ask; but when he listened again, his heart palpitating as a woman's and his very breathing suspended, he heard no other voice than that of the old woman, crying out pitifully that he should open to her.

"Señor, for the love of Christ open the door! There is some one in the house; I can hear his steps!"

The voice guided him; the new danger carried his attention from the old. Swiftly now, brushing the obstacles on one side, he gained the door and his trembling hands turned the key. There was light at last. It fell dimly upon the ghost-like furniture; it showed the crimson of the carpet almost black beneath its rays; it fell upon the face of Isabella, his wife, and

it answered for ever that question he had asked so vainly and so often.

For Isabella lay still and white at the bed's foot, and he knew that she was dead.

* * * * *

He set the candle down upon the unbroken table and bade them light the lamps. The maids sobbed at their task, but the old woman muttered and crooned in incoherent Spanish. His first glance was a swift one about the room to search for any evidences of a struggle or of the presence of a second person; he could find none, so he stooped and lifted the dead woman to the bed.

He knew that she was dead, though the others would have denied it; the hard-set expression of the face, firm in its witness of some surpassing fear, the wide-open eyes, staring dreadfully at a light they could not see, the absence even of a trace of pulse and the clear mirror which her lips could not mist over—such proofs his knowledge told him to be infallible. None the less he acted as though she were living and could be saved. His own belief that she had died of some great shock immediately following upon her awakening from sleep did not forbid him from taking these steps which considerable, if amateur, medical skill suggested to him. And the first of these was to throw the windows wide open and to give her air; the second to wet her lips with brandy and to seek to bring warmth and blood to the bloodless limbs.

"Where does the nearest doctor live?" he asked the old woman. It was the first word he had addressed to her since she entered the room. She wrung her hands and answered him by imploring the dead woman to speak

to her. He must take her by the shoulders in the end and compel her to reply.

"The doctor, where does he live?"

"There is no doctor at Santa Clara, señor!"

"Then some one must go to San José—we shall find one there, surely?"

"The good God knows, señor. She is not dead; she will speak to us presently. Oh, dear Jesu, if she would hear me!"

The old man, awakened from a heavy sleep by the clamour, now appeared at the door of the room and added his questions to the confusion. He proved to be endowed with qualities no less hysterical than the woman, and was quite incapable either of resolution or of action.

"I heard nothing; there has been no one about the house," he continued to repeat. "You do not blame me, señor. She was the friend of us all; who would harm her—who would do such a woman an injury?"

Quentin would not stop to wrangle with him.

"Saddle me a horse—I am going to get help!" he cried; and he pushed the old man from the room and went wildly, almost blindly, out toward the stables. It may be that the true meaning of that which he left in the house was hidden from him; men are rarely able to describe these thoughts which attend a grave accident or a tragic moment of their lives; certainly no realisation of his own freedom and of that which it could mean to the girl who waited for him in England added itself to his experience. That which chiefly troubled him was a childish impatience of little things, and the idea, that if help were not quickly found, some blame for the consequences must lie upon his shoulders. In the stables the same angry unreasonableness vented itself

in rough words to the old man, and a useless going to and fro as though mere desire would saddle a horse and lead him out. Their delay was an outrage to the dead woman ; he could not defend his logic, and the desire for action became at last a headlong impulse to flight.

The stables of the Rancho de las Rocas lay a little south of the house in a second clearing of the woods bordering upon the road to San José. There were fifty yards between them and the garden gate, perhaps ; and to reach them you crossed a little plantation of pines, open and known as "The bower." Quentin had dressed hurriedly enough at the first cry of alarm ; and now, when he had brought the old man to some glimmer of an idea as to what must be done, he ran back for his coat and hat and a scarf for his neck. Within the rancho itself the scene remained unchanged ; the maids were still weeping about the figure of a mistress who, they believed, would awake and answer them presently ; lights burned brightly in the bedroom, though the candle had guttered down to its socket and was blown flat by the draught from the open window. Elsewhere not a sound arose, not a board creaked ; and when Quentin had taken one last look at the sightless eyes and the death-white face of a woman to whom the first passion of his youth had been given honourably and ardently, he ran swiftly from the house and heard the old man calling out that the horse was ready. It was the last sound he heard clearly that night, for he had scarcely set foot in the plantation when a figure slipped from behind one of the trees, and flinging itself upon him, went heavily to the ground with him.

Quentin did not see the man ; he was so adroitly taken by the surprise of it that the unknown had forced

him backwards and pinioned him powerless to the earth before he realised that it was other than an accidental fall. The darkness of the night, the shelter of the pines, contributed to the success of this daring assault and to its outcome. Wrestle as Quentin would with those human cords, strong as he was and fearless, the man held him surely while others ran out from the wood and, kneeling by the prone figure, they knotted ropes about his arms and ankles, bound a heavy cloth about his mouth, and spoke only to tell him that a word aloud would cost him his life. Then he felt himself lifted as a child is lifted by a man, lifted and carried over the soft grass, through the wood toward the road, and so to a cart that was waiting. He heard a man say, "I'll answer for his silence"; the cart began to jolt over the rough road; his senses gradually deserted him, and he became unconscious with that black unconsciousness the administration of which attends a powerful narcotic.

And up yonder on the hill, the lights still shone out from the open windows of the rancho and the maids prayed for day, that they might hear their mistress's voice.

CHAPTER XL

CAPTAIN EZEKIEL FINN

A RAY of burning sunlight focussed by the glass of a cabin window awoke Quentin from a heavy sleep, many hours after they had struck him down in the Rancho de las Rocas. An intolerable headache, coupled to a lassitude which was quite foreign to him, deprived him for a moment of the will to think or the interest to ask where he was. He lay like a child that has been robbed of its activity, yet has no sense of the danger of its complaint; content to rest and unable to recollect the immediate past or the hope of the future.

He was on board a ship, and the ship was at sea; so much an acting brain told him when the first drowsiness of unnatural sleep had left him. This bare cabin with its walls of teak, its quartette of bunks, and its little insufficient windows, reminded him of the days when, as the rawest of lads, he had gone over from Liverpool to Cork in a sailing brig and had wished himself dead before the Mersey lights were lost upon the horizon. And that cradle-like motion, that half-roll followed by a swish of the sea as the good ship dipped to them and was caught by the crest of the succeeding wave—no steamer sagged in a sea like that, he said. He was in the cabin of a sailing ship, he thought, and she was

beating in the Pacific Ocean ; and with so much he contented himself and lay long, watching the lamp swing—or seem to swing—as the ship faced the rolling seas and shivered while she breasted them.

Eight bells in the afternoon watch were being struck when he awoke for the second time after a spell of sleep, which was as much the fruit of his mental weariness as of the drug by which they had trapped him. The sun had crossed the cabin roof by this time, and now shone with a deeper red light through the little window opposite his bunk. The motion of the ship was less violent, and he judged that the wind had gone about and that she was running before it. A sound of voices from the deck without caught him listening with strained ear, but all that he heard was some talk of a house in San Francisco, and of one speaker owing the other a matter of fifteen dollars. To this there followed the shrill notes of the bosun's whistle and the brisk footsteps of the men who turned up from below at the command "All hands to go about." Then they fell to silence again, the lapping seas were the only sound ; and Quentin lay listening to them for a good half hour before the door of his cabin was opened quietly and a hatchet-faced, red-haired man, the very model and picture of the Yankee as England knew him twenty years ago, stepped inside with almost feminine reticence ; and, perceiving his passenger to be awake, did not attempt to conceal his pleasure. Such a humble, abashed manner Quentin had never associated with a seaman before ; and when he heard himself called Mr. King, his astonishment was complete.

"Why, this do find me glad, surely," the man began. "Says I to Michael at seven bells, 'If eight bells don't wake Mr. King, mine's the hand to do it. Sleep's all

very well,' says I, 'but man wasn't born to go through life with his eyes shut, and, drown me,' says I, 'but he's been twenty hours aboard and not so much as a biscuit passed his lips.'"

It was odd to hear this meek and mild harangue, odder still to watch the cringing, fawning figure, measuring his steps one by one, and looking all the while as though the very best sample of the freshest butter would by no means melt in his enormous mouth. Quentin stared at the fellow with undisguised amazement. Either he was a consummate actor, or the mystery of the whole affair surpassed anything his passenger had known or read of.

"My name is not Mr. King," Quentin began. The other's look of wounded surprise was a thing to see.

"Not Mr. King—you are not Mr. King! Ah! that's your little joke, sir. Now come, there were bad times over yonder and you'll be glad of a little soup or something. I'll see the cook this very minute. Dr. James said I was to spare no expense, and none shall be spared —that I do assure you, Mr. King."

Quentin sat up in bed and looked the man full in the face.

"Who are you and what ship is this?" he asked.

The answer was apologetic.

"A good ship, sir; none better in and out of 'Frisco."

"'Frisco, is that your port?"

"It is, sir; two-and-twenty years have I been trading in and out of it, and, please God, I shall trade another two-and-twenty."

"Under what circumstances did I come aboard this boat?"

"Why, sir, to be sure, you should know best about that. Dr. James, says he, 'The gentleman will tell you

as much as you want to know when he is better in health than you find him just now. And no questions to be asked,' says he. Why, sir, there ain't a less curious man than Ezekiel Finn this side of the American continent. You get into a bit of a trouble and your friends see you through it—they paid their money like gentlemen. 'Mr. King will tell you that we have done well by him,' says they. 'I'm glad to hear it, gentlemen,' says I, 'for he would not set foot on my ship unless I thought it.'"

Such a prodigy of well-doing Quentin had never met. There the old rascal stood licking his lips for all the world as though his whole remaining desire of life was civility to his passenger; nor could one say readily whether he were merely a rogue or the dupe of other rogues. By some means or other, fair or foul, the Englishman had been put upon this ship with the story that he wanted a passage to the South. A willing imagination might have admitted that the old man was telling the truth; but if he were, then his manner, surely, libelled him outrageously.

"I am much obliged to you, indeed," said Quentin, whose irony was entirely wasted. "There is only one question I have to ask. Be good enough to tell me something about Dr. James, for, upon my honour, I never heard of him."

The old man looked as if some one had done him a personal injury.

"Why—not know Dr. James, sir!" he exclaimed, "and him passing almost for your own brother. Why, I reckon that's the most extraor'inary thing I have heard this twelve months."

Quentin laughed incredulously.

"Come," he said, "we shall understand each other

presently; I am going to make it worth your while. What's your price, my man? Don't be afraid to tell me—I will pay it!"

Captain Ezekiel Finn again put on the air of a man whose ancestors' graves had been dishonoured.

"Why, sir," said he, "if you mean to tell me——"

"I mean to tell you this—that I have been put upon your ship by foul play, and the sooner you set me ashore again the better. And this doctor you speak of; now, mark you, my man, I have good friends in San Francisco, and they will not rest until they know what has become of me. You may be an honest man; on the other hand, you may not. I will tell you what I think of you when you put me on shore; but I want to warn you that you have embarked upon a very dangerous business. Let us begin with that. I am an Englishman, and my friends are perfectly well acquainted with your confederates. It will pay you to put me ashore; it will cost you a good deal to keep me. Take your time and your choice and come and tell me when you have decided."

The leer departed from the amiable captain's face during this plain and somewhat disagreeable intimation. He continued to finger the brim of his hat nervously; his tongue wetted his lips as though helping on his words; but he was clearly ill at ease and did not know quite what to answer.

"You do astonish me!" he repeated several times. "If it's my character that's in question, there are plenty of gentlemen at 'Frisco to speak for me, sir. They told me that you were in a bit of a mess and would make it worth my while to get you out of it. My mate was on deck when you came aboard, and they gammoned him with the story that you had been firing a hut together and didn't rightly know the way out. Who was to con-

tradict 'em? You are not the first gentleman I have taken down to the Islands; and precious glad some of them were to get there. Why, look, sir, it is no more to me than a matter of two hundred dollars at the best. Do you think I'd do you a precious bad turn for that—me, Ezekiel Finn, that has traded in these parts all my life? No, not for twenty thousand: 'A friend in need is a friend indeed,' to say nothing of the two hundred dollars. When Dr. James come to me——"

Quentin interrupted him with a gesture.

"Where did they bring me aboard?" he asked.

"In the Bay this very morning, sir."

"Did you know the men?"

"Well, as to that, if it's long acquaintance you're naming, I do answer, not exactly. We had a glass together at Jeffcot's Dive, and he spoke about a party that was wanting particular bad to get to Santa Catalina. 'Finn,' says he, 'you're a kind-hearted man; here's one of my friends,' says he, 'as is a regular good sort; and the sheriff of San José is so fond of him that he's worn out three horses in trying to find him. Finn,' says he, 'if we could put him aboard in the Bay that would be saving the sheriff pounds in horse flesh; and you would be able to set him ashore in Santa Catalina with the feeling that you had done a Christian action.' 'Doctor,' I says, 'if it is a friend of yours, that's as good as a certificate from the minister. You bring him aboard when it's dark, and afore he's slept the liquor off we will stand twenty miles off the shore. It is gospel I'm speaking, sir, and my mate can bear witness. They brought you down at dawn and we weighed anchor an hour afterwards. You are now in the Pacific Ocean, and you won't see any land again until we reach Santa Catalina Bay."

His monstrous rigmarole made it already plain to Quentin that he would discover nothing from this splendid impostor concerning the identity of those by whom he had been brought aboard the ship. Such a very mummy of a man, glib-tongued and meek, might be what he said he was—his story might be true; nevertheless, it seemed idle to pursue it further, and Quentin perceived that he must concentrate all his wit to the task of getting ashore again. Whether, however, this were the fit moment to achieve it, or it were better left for a few hours, he scarcely knew. All that had happened to him, the ghastly scenes at the rancho, the brutal assault, the swift intrigue, insensibility, and the swift surprise of it, left him with a burning brain and a confusion of thought he was quite unable to master.

"Captain," he said, "I am going outside to get some air. Let your cook make me some soup and I will give him a dollar. We can talk better in the daylight; you see that I have been ill."

"Ay, sir; you slept like a log when you came aboard."

Quentin rolled up his sleeve and showed a tiny puncture upon the soft flesh of his arm; he had felt the sting of it since the first moment of waking.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked.

Captain Finn shook his head.

"That is a wound made by the needle of a hypodermic syringe," he said. "Your benevolent doctor wished to be quite sure that I should not wake up at an uncomfortable hour. You see that I have been drugged, Captain Finn? Go and think over it while I dress. If we are no more than twenty miles from the Bay I will make it worth your while to put me ashore again."

"I'd do it willingly if the wind would let me," was the surprising answer. "It takes a cleverer man than Ezekiel Finn to say where the wind's to come from, sir. It's blowing full east this moment, and if you made it twenty thousand dollars I could not put you ashore to-night."

Quentin would carry the subject no further; his desire to go on deck and take in the situation for himself was greater than that of any further argument with the smooth-tongued Ezekiel Finn. Whoever had carried him from the rancho had been at no pains whatever to consult his convenience; he found himself wearing the rough cloth suit he had snatched up hastily yesterday when the cry waked him in the silence of the night; his note-book and some three hundred pounds in dollar bills were still in his pocket; but his watch and chain and scarf-pin were missing, though he believed that he had left them at the rancho and that they had not been stolen from him. For the rest he had no luggage whatever, neither linen nor toilet necessaries; and to this deficiency he must add that of the deck-house, a rough-and-ready structure, ill-fitted, and by no means clean.

He was very giddy when he stood up for the first time, and he clutched the rail of the bunk to avoid a heavy fall. The lazy motion of the ship did not disturb him, for he had become a trained sailor in his youth, and he delighted in the sea and ships and the weather that landsmen commonly shun. Even here under these miserable conditions, the fact that he was at sea appeared to be in some measure a guarantee of freedom; and when he opened the door of the deck-house and a cool breeze of night blew upon his face, it brought a better gift of strength than any drug the pharma-

copœia could have named for him. For many minutes he did but stand at his door and breathe deep and long, a full breath welled by the spindrift, full of the odour of the sea and salt upon the lips. And the effort cleared his brain, the giddiness left him. Doctor Ocean dealt with it swiftly.

Conscious of relief, he began to peer about him to satisfy himself as to the nature of Captain Finn's story and the kind of craft skippered by so humble a philanthropist. The *San Benito*—for such was the ship's name, written in letters of dirty white upon life-buoys no cleaner and the stern of a dinghy painted black—the *San Benito* was the smallest of full-rigged ships it was possible to conceive; a model of a ship, indeed, but by no means a highly finished or cleanly one. The deck-house in which Quentin's cabin lay was beneath a gaudy poop, where stood an American quartermaster at a small and unpolished wheel. The three masts lacked height and dignity; the rigging appeared to be deplorably old; there were but five men upon deck, and of these one was a nigger and one a Chinaman—the much-applauded cook.

The latter stood at the door of a miserable galley built almost amidships; a galley from whose tin chimney, set awry, a thick cloud of smoke was carried swiftly by a fresh easterly wind. Forward of this a deck cargo of brightly-painted agricultural implements, particularly ploughs and reapers, occupied the space almost to the fo'castle, where another house accommodated the crew. All these things Quentin observed at a glance; but that which interested him chiefly was the dark horizon and the crested breakers it seemed to release and start upon their mad race toward the ship. The sleek-tongued Ezekiel clearly had not exaggerated

the impossibility of making San Francisco; the off-shore wind answered for him; it sang in the rigging above, laying the ship stiffly over as she tacked to port, and promising a wild night of storm. No sailing ship that ever was built could make 'Frisco until that wind changed.

Some one said, "Good evening, sir; we are going to have a roughish night." When Quentin looked up to the poop whence the words came he perceived there a man with the reddest face he had ever seen in all his life—a short, squat man with a bulbous countenance and the ghost of a merchant-seaman's uniform hovering about his robust figure. This fellow had been watching him with interest. Like his chief, he appeared to be a man of humble—nay, almost timid—address, and yet there was a merry twinkle in his eye, and it invited confidence. Quentin stepped up the ladder immediately and responded to this cordial advance.

"You are Mr. Michael, the mate, I suppose?" he began.

"No other, sir; mate of this ship seven years for luck. She'll bury me yet."

"Then you give her a bad character?"

"God bless her, no! She's as game a little body as you will find in the Pacific. That why I cannot leave her, sir, though I've had some tidy offers in my time. Pleased to welcome you aboard, Mr. King, and I do hope you find yourself better this evening."

Quentin laughed outright.

"You were on deck, I think, when they brought me here?" he asked.

The man nodded and winked.

"I was that, sir. Dr. James, now—he's a wonder, isn't he? There never was such a man. 'Here's my

friend,' says he, 'that's been better than a brother to me; so popular ashore,' says he, 'that there won't be a keg of whiskey in the town if I don't do something for him. We will help him aboard,' says he, 'and if there are any inquiries after him you will know what to say. He's a rare kind gentleman,' says he, 'and it's a pity to part him from his friend, the sheriff. They'll be wearing hat-bands at the station in San José,' says he, 'but we should do unto others as we wish them to do unto us; and if you was overcome with liquor and had the police on your heels, Mr. Michael, it would be a Christian act to put you on board a ship, as you will admit.' 'Say no more,' says I; 'we've a passenger cabin on the *San Benito*, and the sooner your friend is inside of it the better. As for your sheriff, let him come aboard and drink milk; there is one or two of us can sew him a hat-band which he won't leave off for a month.' So you see, sir, they brought you down in the cart, and we had the long boat at the quay. 'The gentleman could not wait for his luggage,' says Dr. James, 'but I dessay you can find him, Michael . . .'; and that's true if you are wanting anything, sir. I have a nice little kit down below, and should the day come when you want to change your shirt, John Michael's your man. They used to call me a dude once; that was before Baldock's funeral in Valparaiso. Clothes is for the women, all said and done. I could wish sometimes that I was a nigger in a bandana handkerchief."

Quentin was perfectly well aware that the man was an excellent liar, but he listened to him with patience. By whatever means he himself had been brought to the *San Benito*, clearly this was no place to resent them. That men were often smuggled out of Western towns

when an inconvenient constabulary desired their better acquaintance was a fact as old as American history. He admitted the possibility that some such story as Mr. Michael related might have been told to him by those who wished to remove him from San José. His head was too full of the immediate moment to permit him to review the whole circumstance as it must be reviewed before its mystery was resolved. Ever present with him, yet put aside as something that must not yet be thought upon, was the figure of the rancho, the vision of the dim room and the shadow of death. From time to time, admittedly, the suggestion of it flashed upon him; a voice whispered "Freedom; you are a free man!" but upon the other side there lay a suggestion of a supreme doubt and the presence of real grief. The maids did not believe that Isabella, their mistress, was dead; he himself could name no just cause of her death, and yet he had no doubt of it, and was compelled to associate it closely with the same conspiracy which had put him on board the *San Benito*. In this opinion he did not follow up the amazing narration with which the mate had favoured him; but, turning it adroitly, he asked a question.

"You know 'Frisco well, I suppose, Mr. Michael?"

"Why, sir, I have walked every brick of it since I was six years old."

"Are you acquainted with Dr. Joe Dillon there?"

"What! Joe Dillon who lets off the rockets for the Bohemian Club?"

"The very man; he's a friend of Dr. James, I think."

"Maybe; I have never seen them together. The first time that ever I met James in my life——"

"Was yesterday, I suppose?"

"Ah, that's near it; I'll keep nothing from you."

"He had a Spaniard with him, had he not? A young man with a heavy black moustache?"

"That's so. Talked the lingo like a flute, he did. Would he be a friend of yours?"

"He loves me as much as your lantern-jawed doctor. Let's talk of something else. You have clothes to sell?"

"Why, as to that, I never thought of selling them, sir. When Freddy Barlow, who'd been down to Samoa with us, struck tin out of his dead grandmother, he left me his kit and all for a bit of a keepsake. 'Old Michael,' says he, 'I wish to be always near your heart.' Well, I've never worn them—a red shirt and a red mug ain't a pretty combination. You are welcome to the lot, so far as I'm concerned."

They went down to his cabin, a stuffy hole at the foot of the companion. Directly the door was shut Quentin took out his pocket-book and began to finger the notes it contained.

"Here's a hundred dollars to begin with," he said. "You will find me free with the money when we go ashore, Mr. Michael. I was telling Captain Finn that I have changed my mind; it would be worth twenty thousand dollars to him to put back to 'Frisco. Now, candidly, what are the chances?"

The bulbous-faced Michael went to the door to see it any one were listening, then crossing the cabin upon tip-toe, he said, with the oddest expression possible in his bleary eyes—

"Never trust a Quaker, sir; not a dollar, not a dollar!"

Quentin liked the red-faced Michael.

"The wind's in the wrong quarter, eh?" he exclaimed, with a laugh.

"It will remain there until we make Santa Catalina, sir."

"He has been well paid, Mr. Michael——"

"I know nothing about that, sir."

"But you are not above making twenty thousand dollars for yourself, eh? And you will think things over during the next day or two?"

"Meaning that you want to go back to 'Frisco?"

"Meaning that I want to get to Europe without the loss of an hour."

"You would pay something for your passage, I reckon?"

"My agents in San Francisco—Kelly, Baird, and Kelly—will pay you the twenty thousand dollars the day you put me on a London-bound steamer."

"Well, I see you were an Englishman directly you came aboard. Old Finn will be climbing planks for this if he don't take care. I must take my time, sir; we are better on opposite sides of the ship, perhaps. As for the duds, why, here they are. Just take your choice and pay me when you like and what you like."

He brought an old sea-chest from beneath his bunk, and displayed upon the dirty blanket a collection of fancy shirts and drab linen suiting—"Gay clothes enough," as he put it, "to see a nigger into paradise." They were still sorting them out when the meek voice of Ezekiel Finn summoned Quentin to supper.

"You must make yourself at home here, Mr. King," that worthy said, as he led the way to the chief cabin. "It may be a month, you know, before we are parting."

Quentin did not offer any comment. Whatever the meaning of this voyage might be, he had already determined that he would quit the *San Benito*, even if he had to swim ashore.

CHAPTER XLI

UNDER BARE POLES

QUENTIN did not believe that he was in any danger upon the *San Benito*, nevertheless the mate's warning was not lost upon him, and he kept a close eye upon the humble and sleek-tongued Ezekiel Finn, who was perpetually in and out of his cabin with the invariable apology and the firm determination to allow his unwilling guest no other name than that of "Mr. King." In itself annoying, this espionage troubled the subject of it but little during the first forty-eight hours of their passage; for the wind blew half a hurricane at midnight of the first day and did not abate until another thirty hours had passed. During this time, the crazy old ship wallowed yards deep in the enormous waves of the angry Pacific; the crew were at the pumps incessantly; such food as came into the cabin was the dregs of pots and the unadorned dry biscuit; the noise of storm became deafening as thunder. A steamer scarcely could have made headway against such a gale; the *San Benito* simply ran before it under bare poles.

In so far as it diverted his thought, from the more recent days of his life at San José, in so far as it compelled him to say "There is no alternative to this," Quentin welcomed the storm. Something akin to his

own ideas of mastery and dominion seemed reflected in those mighty walls of water which loomed above the flying ship, threatened her from crested altitudes, sent their spindrift in blinding showers over her decks, and raced onward to far distant cliffs and continents, there to thunder upon iron shores and to bid the landsmen watch for such as were in peril on the sea. As these ruled omnipotent, so must it be in the ambition of man to rule, in the hour of necessity, over those forces of the mind by which human destiny and human passion are controlled. A vast majesty of power here invited homage ; the wind admitted no law of opposition ; and yet against these a few puny men were warring successfully, not by opposition but by assent. They played the servile courtier to the kingdom of the deep, with the knowledge that any lack of servitude must be repaid by the penalty of death. Quentin admired seamen always ; he paid a new tribute to the heterogeneous twenty-six who followed the sleek-tongued Finn, a fine sailor now that he was put to it. By these men should salvation come. They would have laughed aloud had you spoken of the doubt.

It would be a pitiful thing enough that he, a wanderer, cast out so far by fortune and buoyed up now by a distant vision of that goal which he had paid so great a price to reach—a pitiful thing and ironically foreordained if he must go down in the company of niggers, Swedes, and Chinamen, to an unknown grave in the Pacific Ocean. The reflection came to him in those interludes of storm when the men stood back from the pumps with the sweat and the salt thick upon their faces and bloody hands which the iron had cut. Far as the eye could see, the black curtain of the heavens touched the eternal foam-capped seas ; the wind echoed the voice of an unknown land—not a sail came to their view ;

they might have been upon the waters of a shoreless sea, doomed ever to roll and groan in this trough of darkness. Let the man who controlled their destinies forget—it might be but for a single instant—and the end would be then. But the meek Finn stood at the wheel now, and no dictionary maker that ever lived could have derived the strange oaths which fell from his lips. A transformed Ezekiel in his oilskins, a master mariner, a genius, slipping from breaker to breaker like a base-ball player to his base ; dodging the tenth wave surely—but anathematising them to the point of horror. Quentin believed in Finn ; but the storm showed him how little he might hope from this man when the crisis passed.

It fell calm suddenly at one bell in the first watch, three days after they had left San Francisco Bay. Not a man aboard the ship had the smallest notion as to where they were or what the true course might be. The wind dropped as it drops in the Pacific Ocean, instantly and leaving a great void. Not a breath stirred now ; the glittering stars shone out from the vault of the deeply blue heavens ; the long, rolling swell rocked the ship as though to the sleep she had earned. And the crew fell back from their tasks as men half drunken with excitement and giddy with fatigue. There were but three altogether upon the deck at two bells, and Quentin was one of them. His thoughts had crossed the waste of waters and travelled to distant England, to his home, to his wife, to all that remained dear to him. What was Alice doing in that imagined house by the river? He had written to tell her that he was coming home by an early steamer. She waited for him with enduring affection, he believed, and would be the first to laugh at the suspicions which troubled her old friend Philip. So

much an over-ready confidence allowed; but the other side of the argument insisted upon being heard, and it was not so pleasant. How, if any combination of circumstances forbade him reaching England or cabling early news of his delay? The *San Benito* stood out in the Pacific; its course was not that of any known line of ships; its port was an island far down the Californian coast. Granted that Ezekiel Finn were willing for a consideration to help him, he might at the best catch a steamer to San Francisco and be in England within the month. But was the velvet-tongued Ezekiel thus to be bought, or had he been bribed too surely by those who were willing to pay a big price to have their way with his dead wife, Isabella? So much remained to be proved. The mild stars blinking in the clear vault, beyond which lie the mysteries, certainly could say nothing upon such a problem as this. Mate Michael, who had the watch, was a far more useful ally. Quentin had scarcely spoken two words to the mate since the wind began to blow. He turned to him now with that interest the noble subject of self ever inspires.

"A better night than you promised us, Mr. Michael."

"That it be, sir. I reckon this old wind has gone where I'd like to be—in a good bed with an oyster supper inside of me."

"We shall get that at Santa Catalina. I suppose, if it's fair weather, you might make it in a week?"

"More likely two at this time of the year—a west wind's what we're to look for, though it's been blowing from the other side."

"I can get across to the mainland, I suppose, and take a train to 'Frisco?"

"Yes, you might do that, sir. I don't doubt that Captain Finn will show the road."

"It should be a plain road, surely."

The bulbous-faced man listened for an instant to make sure that no one stirred on the deck below.

"Ay," he said presently, "easy enough for them that don't fall!"

"I take your meaning. You are not forgetting that the friend who picked me up again might see five thousand dollars under his nose."

"Then the money's safer in the water, sir."

He held up his finger significantly and, as though fearing the quartermaster at the wheel, he pretended as though he had business forward, and led Quentin step by step amidships, until they stood at the foot of the great mainmast, now studded with sail to the very royals.

"Look here, sir," he said, "the time for all this standing off is gone by as between you and me. You want to get ashore, and I don't believe it's in Finn's head to let you. You come to me, believing I'm a white man, and you offer me twenty thousand dollars to help you. Well, I like the sound of it, and I'll give you as fair an answer. If you wait until we go ashore down yonder, your chance wouldn't buy you a decent headstone. Finn's got friends ashore, and rum 'uns some of 'em are. Don't you go and wring towels with them. I know the kidney, and many a white man's watch and chain we've drunk up along with them. What I say, sir, is just this—you must get away from this ship before she touches port. It's to be done I do believe, and I can do it for you. Old 'Humble-Mug' likes a good bed when he can find one and a drop of something strong to say his prayers with. The ship won't see overmuch of him once the wind sets fair and the sea goes down. The rest of it is my business. You give

me a bill on your agents and I'll set you aboard the first steamer going north. If it's a bargain, we'll shake on it now; the less we're seen pow-wowing together the better. You sign the paper and I'll hail the steamer when Finn's below. It's the best I can do for you, and God help me if the old man gets wind of it."

"By which you would say that he has something of a temper?"

"I wonder he don't set the deck on fire!"

"Oh! he'll do that yet. Well, you shall have your bond. Are we likely to sight a north-bound steamer soon?"

"I wish I could tell you—there's plenty trading between Valparaiso and 'Frisco. If you've any luck we'll pick one up before the week is out. I could put you aboard if 'twas my watch. 'Humble-Mug' don't wake easy; they'll have to blow the last trumpet twice to wake him. We'll say your friends sent after you, and that'll skeer him. I reckon those Quakers want some skeering too!"

"I see that you are prepared to take the consequences."

"I take anything I can get, afloat or ashore, sir. If a man tried me right here with a hundred-dollar bill, there ain't no blessed alligator would swallow it more kindly. You leave old Finn to me; I know what to put in his glass. Not that I ain't afeard of him—I am, and that's God's truth! He's a raging devil if you cross him, though a softer-spoken man never sailed a ship out of 'Frisco Bay. We'll have to salt his tail when he's perched, sir—that's the best I can think on. Do you turn in now, sir, and leave me to think of it. 'Twould never do to be seen confidential by one of these niggers. Finn's as 'cute as a down-town lawyer. I'll have to

pass for his own brother in mischief until the time's ripe."

"I understand," said Quentin. "You shall have your bond to-morrow—payable when news of my safe landing is received by my agents."

"That's putting the sea risks round my neck."

"I'm afraid you must take them, Mr. Michael. I'll make a concession—put me on the deck of a passenger ship and I'll add an order for payment anyway."

"That's fair. God help old Finn when he hears it's done! He'll swear away his soul; but that's his look-out, anyway, and I doubt if it ain't swore already."

Quentin could not express any opinion upon such a nice problem; but he turned in with some better hope, and when he slept, he dreamed of his English home and of Alice. A great tenderness toward her was the chief impulse of his dream. How greatly they two had loved, how greatly they had suffered! Destiny had cast him far out from her upon this great ocean; and this final adventure dictated by capricious Fortune—how ironically pitiful it seemed at such an hour. Nay, he doubted if he had viewed it in that serious light it must be viewed. The events of recent days were too near him that he might estimate them justly. But that which grew out of them and shaped most surely was an overmastering desire to return to the woman he loved, without whom his hope had no meaning.

CHAPTER XLII

FOR FREEDOM

THREE windless days, when the sea was like a vast inland lake, a mighty mirror of burnished glass, waveless beneath a burning sun, followed upon the storm and found the crew sulky and fretful in the hours of unavoidable idleness. The skipper himself rarely came from his cabin except it were for the noonday observation, when his humility before Mr. Michael and his apparent subservience to his passenger were almost the only humours of vastly dull days. To Quentin this amazing man made his apologies with exasperating regularity. He deplored the windless skies and the waveless waters with such a lifting of his eyes to heaven and such self-abnegation that few could have resisted laughing in his face. And it was wonderful to observe the pertinacity with which he stuck to the name he had given his guest and the purpose of Quentin's voyage, as he chose to imagine it.

"I never see such weather, Mr. King," he would say —"never in all my days. Here's you wanting to get to Santa Catalina, and me wanting to put you there, and the Lord's again' us both. Well, well, we must bow our heads, sir. Winds is like women—not always what we want them to be. But we've got to put up

with them all the same, sir. Do you make yourself as comfortable as may be and be sure and report that Chow-Wow of a cook if he don't do well by you. Lord, to think how anxious you must be, and me not able to help you at all! Man's but a poor thing, sir, as the Book tells us."

Quentin was no longer at the pains to contradict him. A man accustomed to accept the decrees of natural fortune without complaint, he had never known a moment in his life when he so raged against nature as during these days upon the burning deck of the *San Benito*. Hour by hour his desire to be up and doing, to race, as it were, headlong toward Europe and his home, had been growing upon him until it now possessed him as a mania. These confined decks became the emblems of a prison; Finn stood for his jailor; the very wash of waters mocked him. There was hardly a minute of the day which found him absent from his station upon the poop, whence disappointed eyes scanned the still sea and numbered every sail that flashed, white and distant, upon the far horizon. Surely no man had ever found himself in a situation at once so humiliating and so impossible! To be adrift here—it might be two hundred miles from shore when every hour was precious—when Alice waited for him in England, when freedom had come to him and the harvest of his sacrifice—to suffer this and yet be impotent—called for the finest qualities of his self-control. And then to be cast by the hazard into this bibulous company of seamen, the dregs of San Francisco, who knew no laws of right or wrong which a few dollars might not amend. It needed but that.

The days dragged by slowly enough; and yet they were not without their events. More than once the

smoke from a big steamer loomed upon the horizon and died away without disclosing even the hull of the ship it came from. Sailing vessels of all kinds drifted upon the glassy mirror of waters, steered by the caprice of tides, and, in a sense, uncontrollable. They passed the *San Benito* so closely sometimes that the skippers exchanged news or ornamented pleasantries as the mood found them. At noon upon the second day the British Transport Company's cargo steamer *Vulcan* steamed by on her northerly course and stood in so near to them that a man could have tossed a biscuit on her decks. It chanced that the meek Ezekiel was in the very act of taking his reckoning when this happened; but he looked up and caught Quentin's eye, and the glance which the men exchanged expressed the thoughts of each without need of words. During the rest of the day Ezekiel Finn was meek to the point of absolute prostration. But he had said as plainly as he could say, "Your port's Santa Catalina"; and Quentin had answered, "We will settle it later on." The situation evidently had become dangerous. Quentin doubted no longer that Isabella's friends in San Francisco had paid this man a heavy price; and he was at his mercy, absolutely without any means of defence.

Perchance the hours became the more exciting for this and were lived more swiftly. A philosopher always, Quentin argued that if Finn meant mischief he would do it, and that no watchfulness, no appeal to the ragged crew, would prevent its being done. Whatever his danger was, he accepted the chances of it, believing sometimes that by crisis would his own salvation be found. None the less, he waked often from his sleep, believing that he heard a light step in his room; and once he could have sworn that Finn was bending over

him while he slept and that the man's meek eyes now shone as two globes of fire. This hallucination endured a full week, during which time the wind was never more than a capful and the ship scarcely a hundred miles upon her course. It was the same hallucination which sent him bounding to his feet at dawn on the ninth day when a hand touched him on the shoulder and a voice cried: "Please get up." He had the fellow by the throat in a twinkling and loosed him as readily. For he was no other than Mate Michael, and he had come to tell of a ship.

"Good God, Mr. King, what do you go to do that for?"

"Is it you, Mr. Michael? Upon my honour, I thought it was Finn. He's been here many nights."

"And he'll be here again if you carry on like that. Make a bundle of your gay clothes and follow me. Here's the *Guadaloupe* passenger steamer on our starboard quarter, and I've signalled them that I'm sending a boat. Make a hurry, if you please, sir. Old Finn will wake the dead if he comes out."

Quentin could well have believed that he was dreaming it. A clear, wan light of dawn streamed into his cabin and showed him the bulbous face of the mate twitching with anxiety. He heard voices on deck and the sound of ropes running in davits. Then old Michael was speaking of the bond again.

"If you'll step into the cabin we can put pen to paper," said he. "I'm taking the word of a gentleman, and I don't believe he'll go back on me. Safe on the steamer was what you wrote, and a passage to the mainland. You'll get it on yonder ship, sir; her captain's signalled that he'll stand by—he'll give us five minutes, maybe. The Lord send that blarsted Quaker to sleep the while!"

Quentin went into the cabin like a man in a dream; he signed the note to his agents, which he had drawn up a week ago; then he walked out upon the deck and perceived, perhaps a cable's length from the *San Benito*, the vast funnels and the low masts of a passenger steamer. Below him in the water the ship's dinghy waited for him to go aboard; a rope ladder dropped from a yard to the sea, and by that he must descend. Towards this he had taken but a single stride when he felt a hand clapped upon his shoulder, and, turning round, he beheld the flaming eyes of Ezekiel Finn staring into his own.

"What in thunder now?" the man asked.

"I'm going aboard that steamer," Quentin replied very calmly.

"You British swine! get to your kennel quick before I do you an injury! You, Michael, I'll make your hide sing for this. Haul up that boat, there! Do you hear me, you —— niggers! Up with it, or I'll riddle you like a sieve!"

He had a revolver in his hand and he strode toward the bulwarks, flourishing it as he went. This, perhaps, was the most critical moment in Quentin's life. One instant's hesitation, a halt in the step of his courage, and all that he had striven for might have been lost irrevocably—home and wife and freedom sacrificed to the drunken greed of the ruffian who had entrapped him. It was not to be. Resolution came to him as upon a freshet of desire; he looked out toward the steamer as to the goal of his freedom, and, staking all at the hazard, he struck Finn full in the mouth and laid him his length upon the deck. The next instant he had climbed the gunwale and leaped boldly into the sea; the waters closed over his head and engulfed him;

he rose again, a strong swimmer, and struck out boldly for the *Guadaloupe.* A hundred voices cheered him now; they lowered a boat and willing arms drove it toward the swimmer; an honest seaman held out an oar and he grasped it; they had him aboard, dripping wet but laughing with them—the laugh of a man behind whom an unwelcome gate is for ever closed.

"I'm an Englishman and was kidnapped aboard there," he gasped; and then interest prevailing, he asked them: "What ship is this—where are you bound?"

"The *Guadaloupe,*" they said, "bound for Valparaiso."

Quentin laughed no more. It came to him suddenly that the bulbous-faced Michael had lied, after all. And how many long weeks must pass before he saw the shores of England again!

CHAPTER XLIII

A QUESTION OF CIRCUMSTANCE

THE month of September, touching the nadir of London's emptiness, found Alice still in town at her mother's flat in St. James's Court. The strong impulse which sent her from Wargrave to the Carlton Hotel earlier in the summer lived its short life and was buried without regret. For a few days, believing that any steamer might bring her husband to England, she had feigned this air of proud indifference to criticism and open defiance of the machinations of her enemies. But when Quentin did not come and the days became weeks, she owned herself worsted in the battle and returned to Lady Alcester's flat in St. James's Court, there to wait patiently for the appointed day. What had happened in America, what kept Quentin from her side, she could not even imagine; but she waited for him with a woman's patience, almost counting the hours and watching for the letters as for any ray of sunshine which might fall upon her life.

So the season passed, and the social reporter recorded, as he had recorded for many a good year, that Goodwood sounded the knell of all things. It mattered little to Alice that the friends of old time had departed, hither, thither, to find new scenes for old pleasures. These

puny conventions could not trouble one for whom the great question of existence centred in that overmastering desire to know if the man she loved were alive or dead. For she knew that she loved him now ; and she believed that by sorrow love had come to her. The rest was a matter of supreme indifference ; she cared nothing for that which the world said of her—the ambiguity of her position was forgotten. To Quentin in spirit did she render herself utterly. Beyond this nothing could be of any account.

Why did he not return to her? His letter had promised her so surely that he would come. It was the last he had written to her and nothing followed upon it. Philip, who visited her frequently, could throw no light upon the matter. He was a man rocked by many impulses, but standing firm, more by force of circumstance than by will in this hour of opportunity and of temptation. When in August the news of Isabella's death reached him through his agent, Rawdon, he carried it at once to St. James's Court, and Alice learned it with tears not wholly of joy in her eyes. This woman, it may be, had loved as she had loved. Who might judge her?

They became feverish days of waiting now, for surely Quentin must come. His silence perplexed her beyond the hope of all excuse for it. She said, knowing nothing of the truth, that Isabella's illness had kept him in California, and that, the reason existing no longer, he would return without delay. A full month passed in this hope ; and then, without warning, there came to her the premonition that he was dead. She had been writing a letter to him at the moment of this swift suggestion ; and as the pen recorded her womanly message of affection, it ceased to move suddenly as

though another hand had gripped her own and forbidden her write. "Your message is for the dead," the voice said; "whisper it to the winds by night and it will be heard." She accepted the omen, and left the message unwritten. Quentin would know of it, she thought, for it seemed to her that he was near her in that dreadful hour.

Philip visited her rarely after he had told her of Isabella's death; but old Lady Alcester of the wasp-waist, who never was a martyr to delicacy of feeling, went headlong into the subject, and for days together she pestered Alice to consult the family lawyer—"the one who arranged Philip's composition," Alice used to retort, and that made the old lady unusually angry.

"You do not even know your position," she used to say; "if anything has happened to your husband what is to become of his money? Do you want that pudding-making sister of his to get it? You must be mad, Alice—when you could be the richest woman in England."

"I should be glad if I were mad!" Alice retorted; but she did not consult the family lawyer; nor did the disposition of Quentin's wealth greatly distress her. All her desire was for his return, and this kept her in London during the hot months when Dicky flirted deliriously at Homburg, and Lady Bill was the "cynosure of all eyes" at Bad Nauheim, and the elderly General Oscar "was being redecorated" at Carlsbad, as Percival, the Earl, declared. She waited and watched with a woman's faith, and September found her still at her post.

It was upon the third day of this month, just upon the stroke of five o'clock, that Philip called at the flat unexpectedly and discovered Alice standing by the window with a somewhat voluminous letter in her hand.

Surprised to see him, for she had believed him to be at Eastbourne, she was about to ask a commonplace question, when his excited manner and nervous tone attracted her attention and she remarked upon them first of all.

"You bring me news!" she exclaimed, as excited now as he. "You bring me news of Quentin, Philip?"

His reply was evasive and indirect.

"The man I sent to America has returned," he said. "I have been with him all the afternoon."

"For God's sake keep nothing from me! Where is Quentin?"

"He was at Valparaiso at the beginning of last month—at Valparaiso, in South America!"

"In South America!"

"There seems to be no doubt of it; he was a passenger upon the steamship *Guadaloupe*, and he left the vessel at Valparaiso. Rawdon has the agent's certificate. I confess I can make nothing of it—it's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard in my life. What can he have gone to Valparaiso for when he said he was coming home? It really looks as though his trouble had been too much for him."

"I don't believe it, Philip. He is coming home to me. He said so in his letter. Philip, I read it to you."

She sank upon the sofa with wide-open eyes and pallid face, utterly unable to understand the reality of his tidings or their moment. A blacker suggestion sent her thoughts back upon the supposition that her lover was dead. For the first time for many a long day she railed bitterly against fortune and the terrible price she had paid for the few brief days of her happiness.

"I am an outcast, a leper for all to shun," she said;

"the kindest of my friends bestow upon me their detestable patronage. How can I bear it, Philip? How can I live days like this when every finger is pointed at me? Oh! my God, why do I live at all —why do I not make an end of it?"

He sat at her side and took her hand in his. It had been in his mind for many weeks that if Quentin Caird were dead, then, indeed, no obstacle stood between him and his love for her.

"Please don't talk like that," he said; "you know that others suffer with you, Alice. And brighter days will come—yes, I feel sure of it. For my own part I am beginning to believe that some supreme misfortune has overtaken Quentin. But you would not be alone, even then, Alice; you have known that for many years."

She had never seen Philip like this, when his usually quiet eyes were ablaze with passion and his hand lay hot upon her own; and if at first her astonishment were very great, she did not answer him as she would have answered any other man. It may be that there flashed through the woman's mind that thought which had come to her when Arthur Danby followed her to Wargrave, "Is not marriage the key to this riddle of destiny?" She repelled such a thought instantly, and, drawing her hand from Philip's, she avoided his confession by an interrogation.

"This man you sent to America, does he know how Isabella Montanes died?"

Philip understood her meaning, and he drew back from her when he answered—

"Yes; as far as can be learned, she died from heart failure brought on by shock. Of course a man figured in it. Years ago it seemed she was as much in love as such women can be (though that may be an injustice to

her) with a young American sailor named Farman. They quarrelled, and he went on a ship to the South Seas. They say that he touched the leper settlement there and fell a victim. Then he returned to San Francisco and haunted the dens of that place for some months; but when the woman appeared once more in California he dogged her steps everywhere and tried to revive the old intimacy. Quentin, it is said, saw the man once in an opium den—he never mentioned it if he did; but the man followed them both to San José, and there is no doubt he entered the house on the night Quentin disappeared from it. Whether he threatened the woman or whether her accident in Paris left heart-disease behind it—the more likely thing—no one seems able to say, but she was discovered dead by Quentin, and the police traced the young sailor to her house. The rest of the story we do not ask for now. I am glad to think that I never let Rawdon pry about as he wished to do, though I was compelled to take certain steps in Quentin's interest."

The story fascinated her, though he could tell her nothing of Quentin's illness in Valparaiso, of his telegram to Wargrave which lay unopened there, and of the truth of that conspiracy by which Isabella's theatrical friends had determined to be quit of him. It fascinated her; nevertheless, she ceased to listen when he began to speak of Rawdon, the agent, and, jumping up impulsively, she remembered the letter which she had been reading when Philip entered.

"Ah!" she said, "how vain it all is, Philip! Look at this. It is a letter from Mr. Emden, the young lawyer. Do you remember our night at the Carlton? You gave me the letter just as we were leaving Wargrave. I never opened it, and found it but yesterday by accident."

"Is it such an important letter, then?"

"It tells me that by the law of England I am Quentin's wife whatever happens."

Philip concealed his own feelings upon the point. Had he been honest enough to say so, he would have told her that he was aware of Mr. Emden's opinion many weeks ago, but that he found his office of consoler too fruitful in the opportunities of intimacy to forego it for a mere lad's pronouncement.

"I believe Emden is right," he said slowly; "but, of course, he is very young, Alice."

"It is not his own opinion, Philip; he consulted three of the greatest counsel of the day. They say that such a marriage as Quentin went through in California would not be binding here, and that I am Quentin's wife in the sight of the English law."

"Then, my dear lady, I am the first to congratulate you. Let me suggest that you now hear reason and go and live at Knowl as Quentin wished."

"I cannot, Philip. God knows I cannot! My heart is empty; I loved him so. Nothing will ever matter again. I don't care for people's judgment at all. Oh, it's all so idle! There is nothing but love in the world, nothing at all!"

A flush came to Philip's face, but he made her no open answer. There had always been a great gulf between this woman and himself; he dared to think at one time that misfortune would bridge it; but this night he knew that it might never be. Bitterly during the months of trial had he waged the battle between what he thought to be temptation and his duty to the friend who had reposed this great trust on him; but now he perceived that it was no temptation at all just because there was but one party to it, and Alice, whom he had

feared so greatly in the early days of her married life, herself rebuked his apprehensions. Well, in after years he might be glad that it were so.

"You will go to Knowl and wait for Quentin there," he said quietly. "I feel sure that he has sent some message and that it has miscarried. He could not have gone to Valparaiso of his own free will, Alice. There is something behind it all that we have yet to find out. I am going abroad this week, and I may not see you again for a long time. The lawyers have everything cut and dried and they will act for me. We have settled your brother's affairs, and I think he will keep out of mischief now. Let me say 'God bless you!' and ask you to remember me always as your friend."

"It could never be otherwise, Philip," she said; "you have been as my own brother to me."

She lifted her face to him and he kissed her. That she knew his secret he was well aware. It must be hidden in both their hearts to the end—such was the unspoken compact between them.

* * * * *

He left her at seven o'clock, and when he had gone she went up to her bedroom to dress, but the spell of it all lay still upon her and she sat long by the open window watching the shadows fall upon the city and the coming of summer twilight. The letter, which the young lawyer had written to her and she had so strangely neglected to open, ran still in her mind, and she reflected upon its meaning and the possible consequences so far as her future was concerned. If the opinion were good in law, then indeed was she the mistress of Quentin's fortune, and she might return to the world assured of a woman's victory. How her

traducers would fawn upon her, she thought! What quakings there would be, what a haste to declare sincerity and unwavering faith! She could imagine the Westerham woman going down upon her knees in an abject denial of the slanders she had undoubtedly put about. Father Dominic, too, would have little to say now, she imagined, where counsels of humiliation and personal abjection were concerned. All the fine prospect which money commanded was open to her if she willed. She might return to Knowl for the autumn, winter at Cannes or Beaulieu, reappear in town next season and fear the questions of none. What a triumph it would be!—ah! if it must not be lived alone.

This sense of utter loneliness had been with her from the first; but it recurred now that Philip left her and the night of hope closed in and no human voice brooked her foreboding. She had no will to seek diversion; the lonely city repelled her. Life had become the most formless affair during these months of banishment; she dined at any hour of her humour; sat often reading until the dawn broke; and was impatient of the suggestions of pleasure. How could money help her if Quentin were not at her side? The hysterical idea that his spirit hovered about her and that he knew her thoughts had troubled and consoled her many a time since he sailed for America; but never did it so wholly possess her as in the immediate hour of Philip's farewell. He was near her; he heard her; he knew that she loved him. Pleasing ideas of sacrifice came to her, and she said that for his sake she could abandon all things that had been dear to her, make any country her home, and suffer all privation. She told him so, her heart speaking to the distant stars as though the heavens were her messenger and all the mysteries the confidants of her

secret. She cried for him passionately; and then in swift reaction, she said that he was dead, and perceived that night had fallen.

* * * * *

He found her at dawn, undressed upon her bed, sleeping like a tired child whose eyes are still wet with tears. She cried out with fear when he waked her; but he caught her in his arms and stifled her cry with kisses, and bidding her look up, she saw the day.

THE END.

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